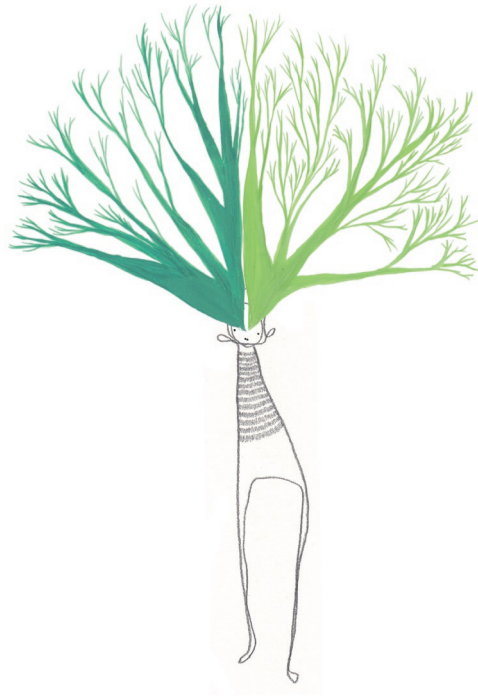


Five Dials



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CONTRIBUTORS

DEAN ALLEN designs *Five Dials*.

ELNA BAKER has performed her stories for *The Moth*, *This American Life*, BBC Radio 4, and at comedy clubs throughout NYC. She's written for ELLE Magazine and *Glamour*. Her first book, *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance*, will be published in October. Her website is at elnabaker.com

JAMIE BRISICK has written two books: *We Approach Our Martinis With Such High Expectations* and *Have Board, Will Travel: The Definitive History of Surf, Skate, and Snow*. His stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *the Guardian*, *Details*, and *New York* magazine.

SALLY CHAMBERLAIN has lived all over the world with her husband, artist/writer/filmmaker Wynn Chamberlain. They are presently roosting in Marrakech, Morocco. Their website is at kadmospublishing.com

RAYMOND CHANDLER is the author of, among others, *The Long Goodbye*.

ALAIN DE BOTTON's most recent book is *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*.

BERNARDINE EVARISTO is the author, most recently, of *Blonde Roots*. Her novella, *Hello Mum*, will be published in 2010.

PAUL EWEN is the author of *London Pub Reviews*.

PAUL FARLEY is the author of three collections of poetry, including *The Ice Age*, which was awarded the Whitbread Poetry Prize in 2002, and most recently *Tramp in Flames*. He lives in north Lancashire.

IAN FLEMING is the creator of James Bond.

TOM HODGKINSON is the author of *How To Be Idle*, *How To Be Free*, and *The Idle Parent* and the founder and editor of the *Idler* magazine. His sermon was presented in London last October at the School of Life.

SOPHIA AUGUSTA PANKENIER is currently living, drawing, painting and building things in London. She has been collaborating with members of the artist collective PLATS since she co-founded it in 2005.

SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH is the author of the memoir *When Skateboards Will Be Free*. His stories and essays have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Granta*, and *Open City*.

ALI SETHI is the author of *The Wish Maker*, which was published in July. He lives in Lahore.

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On Audio Detective Work and Memoir

FIVE DIALS MAY seem at first like a low-tech operation rife with contradictions. We produce an internet magazine, yet some of us still have phones with only two colours on the display. We distribute our magazine to thousands, yet we make hundreds of calls to the help desk, some concerning issues so simple the IT helpers have been known to use a tone of voice similar to the one we use when describing Skype to our parents. We're online; sometimes we can't get online. The passwords don't always work.

Occasionally, though, an opportunity comes along for us to undertake detective work using some very innovative technology – for us. Others might just call it DJ equipment. A couple months ago we came across some old audio of a conversation between the respective creators of James Bond and Philip Marlowe, Ian Fleming and Raymond Chandler. One of our excellent helpers, Jamie Searle, took it upon herself to transcribe the conversation. She knew the recording was crackly and old but wasn't aware of the other challenges that would emerge during the case of the inscrutable audio.

'The first obstacle,' Jamie told me recently, 'was the recording itself, which – due to its age – was not of the best quality. Then there was Raymond Chandler's slightly inebriated state.' The section that took the most time to decipher can be found on page 30 where the two men discuss gang killings and organized crime. 'The sentence "They have to have a crash car – Bugsy Siegel was a great man for the crash car" had me tearing my hair out,' said Jamie. 'Once I'd gotten absorbed into the conversation I wanted to get every little detail accurately.' It seems ridiculously clear to her now, but that snippet of the recording happened to coincide with one of Chandler's tipsy slurs. Jamie took the problem out of the office – she was haunted by it, in a way, and needed a fresh angle, a new lead to locate the missing syllable.

I sent the transcript and audio file link to my home email and enlisted the help

of my partner that evening. We copied that section of the file on to the system he uses to make and edit music, and used his audio mixer to loop the sentence, eliminate the background fuzz as much as possible, and adjust the frequency so that the tones were a little clearer. As I understand it, the fact that the recording is old and in mono rather than stereo makes the isolation process more limited. Fortunately what he could do was enough, and after playing it on the loop for quite a while, maybe half an hour, and searching online for any names which sounded feasible, we finally hit upon Bugsy Siegel. An American gangster, he also had links with Frank "Lucky" Luciano (part of the Genovese crime family), who is mentioned later in the interview.'

Jamie spent a day on the groundwork, that evening on the specifics, and the following morning checking the other references in the article. Thankfully Chandler's slurred mentions of Georges Simenon didn't call for another session of audio isolation. Now we have a transcription of the Chandler and Fleming interview, all down to Jamie's detective work.

'The Topsy, Loquacious Writer' was not the theme with which we set out while assembling the issue. Rather, we're looking at memoir. Gathered here are five pieces of memoir from American and British writers that take readers through the stages of human life, from childhood to middle age, followed by some wisdom from one of the best memoirists out there, Diana Athill, on what it's like to get old and write about getting old, and finally arrive at the daunting possibility of becoming the subject of a biography. Athill seemed to be the perfect person to discuss how the memoirist deals with the prospect of someone else peering over the source material and coming to their own conclusions. It's hard, as she says, to capture one's life as it really was, and hard to write about other people, real people, who might dispute scenarios. We at *Five Dials* have often wondered how memoirists actually make it work, how they live

with themselves, what they worry about, how far they stretch truth, bring structure to otherwise baggy situations, hone art from life's messy offerings, how they write about other people and the responses those other people give back. Each memoirist in this issue has considerably sent in a short explanatory note. Jamie Brisick writes about a cocaine-dusted session in his early life and explains his process this way: 'On a good day, writing about my life is the most sublime, cathartic, godly, and honest thing I could ever imagine doing.' And on a bad day? 'My pathetic life plays back like some annoying Top 40 jingle that lodges in the head and won't leave.'

One other point to make before we begin: I don't know how other magazines measure their growth, but procuring a Paul Farley poem is a milestone for us in our early stages. It's like growing a beautiful new tooth. Part of the thrill of putting out magazines is sending off that first message into the unknown in an effort to draw writers in, to convince them we'll be able to give their words space and an appreciative and international audience. Paul caved in and sent us the poem you can find on page 29. Hopefully it will not be the last one we receive. When I asked him if any of his own poetry could be considered memoir, Paul wrote back a few days later and told me a person could argue 'memoir' works as a partial definition. 'The trouble is,' he continued, 'a poem isn't simply trying to pass itself off as an accurate, factual, historical account of anything. I hardly know where I'm going to end up when I start writing, even if some event or object or impression remembered (or, let's face it, misremembered) is what sets me off; from then on, the poem is trying to make its own sense. So a poem can contain elements of memoir, if you like, but it can only ever be the autobiography of an imagination: my poems often draw on things I've seen or heard or done, of course, but you'd be mistaken to think you 'knew' me from my poems.' Paul might not know where he's going to end up. Jamie didn't know what she was going to uncover when she started listening closer to Chandler and Fleming. They both retrieved a dispatch from a far-off land, as did our memoirists. You'll find the results inside. —CRAIG TAYLOR

'Dude, the guy was a secularist'

Ali Sethi reports on the shutdown in Pakistan

IT WAS THURSDAY in Lahore, a warm night with a light wind playing in the trees outside, and I had decided to go out and see the drummer playing at his shrine. 'It's very late,' said my mother. She was watching TV in her room and preparing to go to sleep.

But it wasn't even midnight, and I said, 'He hasn't started playing yet.'

I knew because I had seen him: Pappu Saaein, the mystic drummer, played his big dhol drum every Thursday night in a trance-like continuum at the shrine of Baba Shah Jamal, a nineteenth-century Sufi who is buried in a dark, leafy compound that is now surrounded by small houses. The shrine was known for the devotee drummer, who had performed in the marble courtyard for years, but also for the mob of howling men who came to hear him, men who smoked hashish in the open and swayed their bodies and chanted to the drummer's intoxicating beats.

'Be careful,' said my mother.

'I've been there before,' I said.

'I know,' she said. 'But things are not the same.'

She was referring to the shootings and bombings that had happened in Lahore.

But I said, 'I'll be back. Don't worry. I'm taking the keys.'

THE SHRINE IS AT the end of a long and narrow lane. And it was at the mouth of this lane that I parked my car: the colourful lights approached in the dark, then the sounds of rickshaws and motorcycles and, behind them, the ruckus sounds of voices. I passed the lighted booths where men were frying sweets in cauldrons, the flower-sellers in their stalls and the long-haired men who had laid out their wares on the ground: I saw bangles and bracelets and amulets and potions in small bright bottles. Then I saw the crowd standing outside the gate, which was locked.

'Where is Pappu Saaein?' I asked.

The boy wore a loose-fitted shirt and trousers and rubber sandals on his feet.

He looked out at the street and said, 'He's not playing.'

'Has he gone away?' I asked. (The drummer went away sometimes to perform at the shrines of other saints.)

But the boy replied, 'He's here.' And he waved at the drummer.

He was slumped on the steps. His dark face was gleaming with sweat, his eyes were shut and his long hair was hanging in wet clumps. Around him sat his minders, the managers and the apprentice drummers, two of whom were talking excitedly on mobile phones.

My informant said, 'He's been thrown out.'

A cry went up: it had come from a little bald boy who was squatting in the mud beneath the steps. He was praising the dead saint and naming his mentors – a chain of rhyming phrases that was meant to gather voices as it went along, merging with the drumming and growing louder and louder until it became the release-cry of 'Hu!'

But the bald boy was crying alone. And the men who sat around him were smoking cigarettes and watching the contortions of his face.

'What's happened?' I asked. 'Where is the drum?'

A man said, 'The government.'

Another man placed his hands on his hips and indicated the drummer with a movement of his eyebrows and said, 'Why don't you ask him?'

I went up the steps.

'Salaam,' I said.

The drummer opened his eyes.

One of the young apprentices stopped talking on his mobile phone and asked, 'What do you want?'

I said, 'Why isn't he playing?' I was conscious now of standing above the supine drummer with a hand on my pelvis, looking vexed on his behalf.

The drummer was looking at my face. He opened his mouth slowly and said, 'They have stopped me.' His voice was low and hoarse but the note of pleading in it was distinct.

'Tell me,' I said. 'I will write about it.'

The young apprentice stood up. He had curly brown hair. He said, 'You are from media?'

I gave him the name of an English-language newspaper.

He whispered it in the ear of the drummer, who was still slumped on the steps. The men around them were looking at me in a new way, threatening or admiring with their eyes.

The drummer said something to the apprentice; another man with long hair and many rings on his fingers leaned in to listen; there was an argument, and the drummer frowned and made a dismissing gesture with his hand. But the young apprentice was excited. He put a hand on my shoulder and led me away from the bodies and down the crowded steps.

Some local government officials had expelled the drummer from the shrine. And they were attributing his expulsion to the smoking of hashish, even suggesting that the drummer himself was supplying it to the crowds that came every Thursday night to hear his drumming.

'It is tragic,' said the apprentice and spread his arms wide. 'He has played in so many countries...'

'And I have never supplied,' said the drummer when I went back to talk to him on the steps. 'Ask these people. Ask them.'

Most of the men were still sober.

'I will write about it,' I said.

But the drummer's eyes became small and angry. 'Don't write about me,' he said, waving his finger, even as his men tried to plead with him. 'Don't put my name in the newspapers.'

IT HAD BEEN a season of capitulations. In February the federal government had signed away a part of northern Pakistan – they said it was for peace – to the Taliban. And in Lahore, the cultural capital, there had been Islamic warnings: bearded men were now standing in the clothes bazaars and were telling young women to cover their bare arms and faces. Some had even appeared outside the high brick walls of Kinnaird College for Women, which faces the canal on one side and a broad and busy road on the other, and had threatened to throw acid on the uncovered girls. The girls had responded with alarm. But the college had responded by offering to

monitor their outfits: there would be no more wearing of jeans or other 'revealing' clothes on campus. And another government-run college, not waiting for the threat, had copied the ban and had put up signs outside classrooms.

Maryam had already graduated from the government-run National College of Arts but she was affected when she heard about the ban. 'It's so scary,' she said, looking more stunned than scared, her eyes wide and her hands folded in her lap. She was sitting in my car, wearing jeans and a black halter-neck top. It was Friday night in Lahore and the weather was good, or at least not bad, as we had begun to say in these middle-of-the-season months while preparing for the heat.

Maryam gave directions to her friend's house. We were driving beneath the high trees of Garden Town and were going to collect Nina, who had attended school with Maryam but had then gone away to America; and after that we were going to the house of a politician, whose son was friendly with Nina. There was going to be alcohol at his house; he had arranged for us to go at midnight to the campus of a privately owned university, where the student-run Music Society was having its ten-year anniversary celebrations.

'It should be fun,' said Maryam, who had dressed for the occasion.

We found Nina's house; the low white gate was made of steel and the house behind it was in darkness. Maryam called Nina on her mobile phone.

'We're outside,' she said.

Nina was a small girl; she emerged from the gate with her thin limbs, her round face and tiny nose and dramatically angled eyebrows, her short black hair in a stylish mess.

'Hello hello,' she said jovially, getting into the back of the car.

She was wearing jeans and a colorful top and had a twinkling nose-stud.

Maryam said something about the dance class they were taking together in the evenings.

'It was good today,' said Nina, laughing.

I asked about their instructor.

Maryam named a middle-aged woman whose renditions of the *kathak* dance form were frequently praised in the English-language newspapers.

'How much does she charge?' I asked.

Maryam said, 'Not a lot.'

'She's leaving now,' said Nina.

Where was she going?

Maryam said the dancer was going to Texas to live with her brother.

'She's trying to go,' said Nina. 'I don't know if she will in the end.'

We were crossing the carefully constructed Jinnah Flyover, which connects the old suburbs of Lahore with the new ones.

'Why does she want to go to Texas?' I asked.

'Because she doesn't feel comfortable here,' Maryam said.

Nina added, 'It's understandable,' and she said it while looking placidly at the dark outside her window. She sat up, tugged at her colorful top and fell back into the seat.

I said, 'That's really sad.'

And Nina didn't say if she thought that it was.

NINA HAD GONE to college in the United States. And after graduating from college she had worked for some years in New York. She was working in the financial sector, for a bank or a consulting firm, and was living in those days with two Pakistani girls in a Manhattan apartment. I heard about them now and then from the people who went to their parties. But the apartment lifestyle was short-lived; I soon saw one of the girls at a book launch in India and she said that she was looking for a job. And not long after that I met Nina in Lahore, at a party she had thrown at her parents' house, where she was living once again. She was still working in the financial sector, though it was the smaller financial sector of Lahore; and she was earning a good salary by those standards. She said she didn't miss New York. She went to work in the morning and took dance classes in the evening, and her life here was full. 'Lots of my friends are still here,' she had said, gesturing at the well-dressed people in her dimly lit garden, many of whom had returned, for one reason or another, after short, vivid interludes in faraway places to the life they had always known.

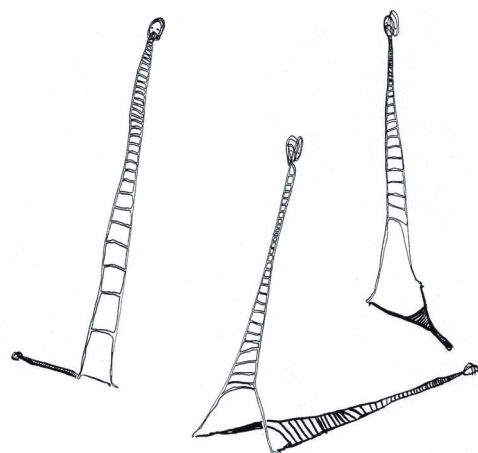
Nina was friendly with the politician's son. They had attended the same private school in Lahore and had then gone to the same American college. She took us that night to his house; she began to give directions in the Defence Housing

Authority, where the houses were new and similarly sized and were surrounded by shrubbed sidewalks. The land had once belonged to wealthy Sikhs who had fled the Partition violence of 1947, and was now owned by the Pakistani military, which had cut it up into plots and leased them out; we passed a waterless fountain at a turning in the street, then a brightly lit ice-cream parlour and a withdrawn-looking, unpainted mosque. The politician's house was in this area; Nina got out of the car and went in through the brown steel gate, past two old men who were sitting on their haunches on the grass. They were servants, and they looked at her without signs of recognition or alarm. She went through a slender verandah, then through a door and up a marble staircase. On the first-floor landing she knocked on a door but then opened it herself and went inside.

The room was suddenly cold; the politician's son was sitting on a sofa, wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He stood up and kissed Nina on the cheek. Across from him on the floor sat another boy with long, curly hair and an unshaven face. He shook Nina's hand and made a funny face. On the table next to him were some unopened bottles of Corona beer.

'Boys,' said Nina with a small smile. 'What's the plan?' She was familiar with this setting.

'We're going to chill here for a while,' said Hassan, whose house and beer it was. He was not much taller than Nina, and was younger than her. He too had returned to Lahore some years ago and



was now working at a radio station.

'Ya man,' said the boy with the long hair. 'It's not starting till late.'

Nina said, 'Guys, this is Fahad. He's the guitarist in the band we're going to see tonight.'

Fahad waved his hand at us.

'You want beer?' asked Hassan.

'Sure,' said Nina and sat on the floor next to Fahad.

'I will,' I said.

'No thanks,' said Maryam, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, her legs crossed at the knees.

Fahad the guitarist sent up his hands, grabbed his long tangled hair and swept it up behind his ears. He said, 'We were just trying to figure out if the drummer in my band is gay.' He was grinning.

Hassan was sitting on his couch again. He drank his beer and asked, 'What are the signs?'

Nina was looking at Fahad.

Fahad said, 'Dude, it's just the *way* he is, like he's all formal and shy when you ask him something. He's always saying he doesn't want to do things.' And this was acted out with primly pointed fingertips

and a high, mellifluous voice.

'Maybe he is,' said Nina neutrally.

'I guess there's no way of knowing,' said Hassan.

'I'm telling you,' said Fahad, who was laughing from behind his hand. 'I really think he's gay.'

'You should introduce him to me,' I said without laughing, without smiling, 'and I'll tell you if he's gay or not.' And this, the assertion of gayness as actuality, as a thing that might exist in all seriousness, was too much for them to take.

Hassan frowned and looked away.

Fahad was nodding abstractedly.

Nina took a sip of her beer and returned the bottle responsibly to the table.

'That's a cool picture,' she said.

It was a picture of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, from the time when undivided India's politicians, Hindus as well as Muslims, were still fighting together for independence from the British. Jinnah was kneeling here on the grass, wearing his customary suit and holding his two dogs, his silver hair slicked back and a cigarette pressed between his thin lips. His look was deliberately debonair, the look of a man who is aware of his intelligence and wants to show it, though he would die a bitter, thwarted man after lamenting the 'maimed' and 'moth-eaten' country his political gambles had helped to create.

Hassan had framed this picture and hung it on his wall. He looked at it now and said, 'The man *was* cool.'

Fahad said, 'Dude, the guy was a secularist.'

And Nina laughed and said, 'Check out the dogs.'

We were all looking at the picture now.

Hassan drank his beer. 'It's an awesome picture,' he said. You see it and you want to frame it and put it up.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Because,' he replied, blinking petulantly, 'it captures the guy's essence. That was the guy's personality, whether you like it or not. I mean —' and here Hassan held out the palm of his hand to ward off the usual incredulity — 'the guy ate bacon in the morning and drank scotch in the evening!'

This was the idea of Jinnah's secularism — an idea found mostly in the upper-class drawing rooms of Lahore and Karachi,



though I had also once encountered it on the vast, rutted grounds of Punjab University, where an angry student leader in dusty clothes had cited the founding father's allegedly un-Islamic behavior to strengthen his own call for an Islamic state, for what he went on to describe as the uncontaminated vision of the Prophet Muhammad.

'Why do you look to Jinnah?' he had shouted, pointing his finger at my chest. 'Why don't you look to the Prophet and his companions?'

'Because it was Jinnah who asked for Pakistan,' I said. 'It was Jinnah who made the demand for Pakistan.'

I thought it was enough.

But the boy had laughed and said, 'Pakistan was made for Islam.'

It was startling, this expansion in the rhetoric of the religious right, which had initially condemned the call – Jinnah's call – for a separate homeland for the disenfranchised Muslim minority of India. In the 1940s the mullahs had resisted this idea of a Western-style nation state; in the 1950s, once they were already inside Pakistan, they began to protest against it; and in the 1970s they began to alter it from within, making their first encroachments on the state, asking for (and getting) Islamic 'concessions' from the then-embattled government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – the desperate prime minister had just rigged an election and was trying to quell the ensuing riots, and to win the support of the religious parties he ordered the shutting down of all casinos, bars and nightclubs in the country. (The ban was implemented, but the plan failed; the rioters were only emboldened by the concessions and intensified their campaign, and a few months later Bhutto was deposed, jailed and then hanged by his favorite general.)

In Pakistan this kind of history tends to repeat itself: people come and go, and by the end of it your world is somehow smaller, your rights fewer, your voice dimmer and more easily drowned out. The ranks of the rioters are always growing, and the rich are building high walls around their houses. I was acutely aware of this feeling that night in Hassan's room, holding the imported, bootlegged bottle of Corona beer in my hand and speculating with the other America-returned children about the secularism of a man who

had been dead for more than sixty years.

Suddenly I remembered the drummer at the shrine.

'Pappu Saaein's been banned,' I said.

Hassan said, 'What?'

Fahad said, 'No way . . .'

Nina asked, 'Why? What did he do?'

Maryam was looking at me expectantly; I had told her about my visit to the shrine in the car.

'Some minister,' I replied – and here I looked at Hassan, whose father had been a minister in the provincial government – 'has decided to throw him out. The minister says there's too much hash at the shrine.'

They laughed.

I said, 'The minister says Pappu Saaein is supplying the hash.'

'Who's the minister?' Hassan asked.

I gave him the name.

'Doesn't ring a bell,' he said.

They were quiet.

Then Nina said, 'That's so weird . . .'

And Maryam said, 'Everything is being banned these days . . .'

'What can we do about it?' I asked.

Hassan said, 'There's nothing you *can* do, basically.' He said this and put the beer bottle to his mouth, but it was empty.

I said, 'You can write about it. You can send a camera crew there and put it on TV.'

'Oh,' said Hassan. 'That's right. You'll send a camera crew to the shrine. Remind me: why would you do that?'

'So that people can see what's happening there.'

'Yes,' said Hassan. 'People will see all the pot-smoking and then you'll *really* get the guy into trouble.'

'What's the alternative?' I asked. 'Let him sit for some weeks on those steps? People will go away after a while. And he'll stop playing. That'll be the end of it.'

'It won't,' said Hassan. 'Ignore the issue and it will go away.'

Nina had been listening to this and now she said, 'What's the point you're making?'

I said, 'If you don't defend a space it gets smaller.'

She thought about it.

Hassan said, 'What the guy does *not* need is a media circus. It's the last thing he needs. Trust me. There are other problems in this country.'

And this idea – the other problems of other people, the larger scheme of things, the bigger picture – was used here not to urge action on another scale or in another direction, but to kill the current argument.

I said, 'The people who go to that shrine are not like you and me. They don't have beer to drink on the weekend.'

Hassan laughed and said, 'That's not the point.'

'It is,' I replied. 'They go there and smoke hash because they have nowhere else to go.'

'So you want to legalize marijuana?' said Hassan. 'You think you can do that? You think that's the most important issue in Pakistan right now?'

'Because now you're being pro-drugs,' said Nina intelligently.

I went with them that night to the rock concert at the private university. More than a thousand boys and girls, wearing jeans and tops and frocks and shorts and sandals and also hijabs and shalwar kameezes, were standing on an enclosed lawn under the moon and were swaying their arms to the music. Fahad, who had been quiet for most of the evening at Hassan's house, was now on stage and transformed: he spun and hopped and scowled and sang Pink Floyd ('We Don't Need No Education'), and Hassan and Nina and Maryam hooted and clapped for him. There was cigarette smoke in the air and empty plastic bottles on the ground; I even smelled the ripe smell of hash. But it was allowed here, or not yet disallowed; the young musicians continued to sing and shout from the stage, and their young audience continued to sway its arms. Then a boy appeared from behind the stage, walked up to the microphone and made an announcement: the concert was ending for reasons that could not be disclosed at this time.

There was confusion.

But the people in the audience, who were accustomed to abrupt endings, were soon filing out.

At the entrance we passed the ticket collector, who was sitting on a chair and wore an official's badge on his breast.

Nina said, 'What happened?'

And the man looked away and said, 'It was not allowed. It was never allowed.' ♦

John Banville's *The Sea*

A Fiction by Paul Ewen

SOON AFTER winning the Booker Prize for his novel *The Sea*, John Banville was quoted as saying:

We writers are shy, nocturnal creatures. Push us into the light and the light blinds us.

His quote seemed to echo the sentiments of Max Morden, the central character in *The Sea*:

To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of wombly warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky's indifferent gaze and the harsh air's damagings.

When I heard that John Banville would be speaking to a crowded London Review Bookshop therefore, I immediately bought a ticket, imagining a shrieking man, melting and writhing on the floor.

In *The Sea*, Max Morden finds shelter in the past, vividly recounting events that have taken place some fifty years previously. He recalls in rich detail one summer in particular where, as a boy, he is befriended by the Grace family, despite the vast differences in class that exist between them.

That I had managed to scramble from the base of those social steps all the way up to the level of the Graces seemed . . . a token of specialness, of being the one chosen among so many of the unelect. The gods had singled me out for their favour.

When I find myself amongst the attendees of author events, I too am gripped by a sense of achievement. In my experience, it is often the intelligent, well-read, well-to-do classes that frequent such literary gatherings, and the John Banville event proved no exception. On the evening in question, I had arrived in my gardening clothes, flapping about like a pigeon inside a train station, not quite

sure how I'd got in. It's difficult to know the dress code for these bookish occasions. Part of me acknowledges a certain formal reverence that comes with the presence of the authors themselves (in this case a Booker Prize winner), and also my fellow audience, who are, for the most part, exceptionally groomed. At the same time, however, our seats were plastic fold-out chairs; we were in a bookshop, not Grosvenor House; and books themselves are often read on toilets by people with their bottom bits bared.

The woman seated to my left was all fancied up in a brown sequinned dress, and her leg was positioned across her knee, causing her suspended leather-strap shoe to breach my space, the area in front of my chair. I gave her foot a polite little pat with my hand, beckoning it back into its rightful zone. But she took exception to this, and began to jerk about like a vibrating chair.

'I-BEG-YOUR-PAR-DON!!' Her voice sounded like a very slow printer printing a large jpeg image.

Meanwhile, her foot still bobbed in my region, so I pushed it again and gave her shoulder a little nudge.

'Get out,' I said.

Her face flushed with colour and her pincer hand squeezed my fleshy side hard, her shoe delivering a sharp heel kick to my shin. Swivelling on my bottom, I raised my feet to the side of her chair and began shunting her out into the aisle. We were pawing and clawing like a flipped fight between sea lions when a red-finger-nailed woman in front turned and hissed, 'STOP IT, YOU TWO!!'

John Banville must have been waiting in some side room, drinking wine for the nerves, or brandy perhaps, like Max Morden favours in *The Sea*. I too was drinking, having helped myself to a bottle of white from the complimentary drinks table. I'd placed this bottle on the Current Affairs shelving to the right of my seat, and while waiting for John Banville to appear I began to browse the titles, my mucky hands policed beneath pulled-

down jumper sleeves. None of the books had been pre-signed, and I attributed this to their non-fiction nature, having been written by journalists, academics and other unsexy people.

It was interesting to think, however, that someone would purchase the very book I happened to be holding, and they would take it back to their house in some borough or village and read it. Having digested a small passage myself, for free, but finding it rather dry, I decided to add a passage of my own. Tearing a page from my notebook, and tearing this, in turn, in two, I wrote, upon the first sheet, SEE PAGE 241. Inserting this between pages five and six, I proceeded to write on the second sheet:

BWARE THE DWARF INSIDE YOUR BODY! BWARE THE LITTLE STARING DWARF THAT PEERS OUT THROUGH YOUR BODY! YOU HAVE A LITTLE DWARF INSIDE YOU! IT'S LOOKING OUT OF YOUR EYES, MAKING THEM TWITCH ABOUT! IT'S STARING OUT OF YOUR EYES! A LITTLE DWARF!

Glancing around at the lightly chattering audience sipping at their single helpings of wine, I discreetly inserted this second note between the polished pages numbered 240 and 241, replaced the book in its shelf slot and rubbed my sleeve hands.

The complimentary wine was tasty, and I was drinking it rather fast, but I certainly wasn't cut when I suddenly heard a voice introduce the evening's author as Benjamin Black.

After the audience applause, a man sat at the table, absorbing the full glare of the spotlight. Unlike most author events, there was no accompanying interviewer, so he faced the crowd alone, as if representing himself in the dock. He began reading from a book, but it wasn't *The Sea*. It wasn't even a John Banville title. It was a book by Benjamin Black. I'd paid good money to see John Banville. Enough for a couple, three brandies. I'd even stored a first edition of *The Sea* safely in my satchel in the hope that it would be touched and signed by the author. But having come to hear Max Morden through the voice of John Banville, I was lumbered with Benjamin Black instead.

Still, it was John Banville, in a sense.

He had a rich Irish voice for instance, and his physical features matched the photo I'd found on the Internet. It was pinned to my wall in fact, above the photograph of his Writer's Room that I'd cut with scissors from the *Guardian*. His Dublin study had bright red carpet, postcards affixed to the white walls, and a thin rug beneath a table, which I'm sure concealed an escape hatch.

'... I used to shut my door on entering each morning and put the chain on ... Here I am unassailable. Or so I like to think.'

John Banville also writes books under a secondary name, and this particular night he had come as the other. He isn't the only author with a pseudonym or an alter ego. Ian Rankin is Jack Harvey, Ruth Rendell is Barbara Vine, and Iain Banks is also Iain M. Banks. However, I'd thought these were names to be hidden behind, to protect the identity, to safeguard the truth. But John Banville wasn't even wearing a disguise. He could have donned a false moustache, or an Ace Frehley painted face. But he must have forgotten. We all forget things, I suppose. Even Max Morden.

I was reminded of people I know who pretend to be other people. People who, when greeted by me in the public domain, feign knowledge of our acquaintance, saying, 'No, you must be mistaken, I'm not that person, I'm someone else.' Though normally at pains to avoid others, preferring the company of plants, birds and insect life, I will, if found to be somewhat loose, loudly sing out a greeting to a comrade. Having spied such a fellow in the pub or across the street, I'll shout their name, repeating it, and then again. But such people, I find, will often look away, or they'll shake their heads and the hands they are extending, saying, 'No, no, no. No, you're wrong.'

I wondered if Benjamin Black had his own Writer's Room. Maybe it was inside one of those mysterious doors on the Underground that read: DANGER: RISK OF ELECTROCUTION. Or perhaps he wrote in a secret chamber in the side of a hill, accessible only by driving one's car into a cave. Could it be that John Banville was the Bruce Wayne character and Benjamin Black was the caped crusader? I nodded vigorously, tapping the side of my nose.

When he read from the passage in his novel, he didn't hold the book right up to his face, obscuring his head, which is what I'd have done to hide the rivulets of brow sweat and my inner dwarf's manic darting eyes. And I'd have brought an A0-sized copy of my book so if I squatted down, I could also block out my torso and legs, existing purely as a voice with shoes. Benjamin Black, meanwhile, held his book out like a red cape, as if daring the assembled crowd to stampede. It was surely just a matter of time before those pre-drinks of his wore off and he began to clutch his cheeks and wail.

The free bottle of wine I'd claimed earlier was empty, so I decided to head back for another. The drinks were positioned just a few large strides to the right

of Benjamin Black himself, who, having finished the passage from his book, was now addressing the gathered literati with anecdotes and amusing tales:

'People tell me things about my books that I know nothing of.'

'There is no black and white, no Black and Banville; there is seepage.'

'You can't say "schmuck" in the *New York Times*.'

I stood there and listened for a time, scrutinizing his performance from the wings. He was a big strapping fellow, with the right sort of physique for lifting cars. But he didn't appear grizzly or dangerous, like Ernest Hemingway; he clearly felt no need to live up to some big-guy image, so there were no tales about tree fellings or monster trout beheadings. His



hands actually looked rather soft and prissy, although I was very sure he could have ripped his book in half with those hands. But you see, he didn't.

He was desperately under-disguised, however, and so, after some time had passed, I set about capturing his attention with a series of arm flaps, like a chimp dance. His speech faltered slightly, like a car that continues to move after its engine has fallen onto the road, and he enquired of my movements with a pensive, awkward stare. Ringing my hands around my eyes, I mouthed the words, 'YOUR MASK! YOUR MASK!'

On the journey back to my seat, I passed a simple paper sign that read 'toilet'. Ducking between an expanse in the rows of chairs, I cautiously descended the steep staircase which led to the loo in question. I'd never been for a wee in a bookshop before, and as I stood in the small basement room, cushioned from

air-strike by thousands of books, I found myself thinking about the radiant light that Max Morden sees in the bathroom of his guest house:

A spot of it on the curve of the hand-basin streamed outward in all directions like an immensely distant nebula. Standing there in that white box of light I was transported for a moment to some far shore, real or imagined, I do not know which, although the details had a remarkable dreamlike definition ...

My eyes had gone cross-eyed in the mirror, and when they refocused I realized my hair and face were completely drenched, leaking great streams onto the tiled floor. I set about paper-towelling my person dry, and as I did, I noticed the disturbed water in the toilet bowl, the shimmering ripples

reflecting a muted light that I myself had activated by pulling a cord that stretched almost to the floor. Toilet paper abounded on a shelf behind the seat, and I unravelled four rolls, wrapping two around each arm before covering them up with my jumper sleeves. My hair was tightly slicked back as I clambered up to the shop, loudly clicking my fingers in time with every new step ascended by my sturdy, no-nonsense shoes.

WHEN THE FINAL drops of the second wine bottle had all but disappeared, I headed back with the empty, eager to tidy away my litter. A narrow aisle had been formed between the plastic chairs down the centre of the bookshop, and as I made my passage like a hairy bride in gardening trousers, I had to support my hands on the shoulders of the congregation because I was walking without a steadying bar across an imaginary wobbly wire. When I passed Benjamin Black a further time, I discreetly slipped him a scrawled note folded inside a knotted handkerchief. The note read:

TIE THE HANKIE ACROSS YOUR FACE!

The Fire Exit door was to the left of the free drinks, and a green plastic sign above it featured an illustrated character running urgently and pointing to his bottom, as if it were aflame. The frame around the door was painted a sullen road-surface grey, and in its centre was a single large glass pane, which I ran towards with a protruding arm and shoulder, smashing through and sounding the alarm.

Although I am a small man, the toilet paper around my biceps gave me the appearance of a Greek god, such as He-Man, muscle-bound and bronzed. However, I found myself susceptible to the icy blast of wind outside, given my damp hair and the fact that I was barely clad within a light toga. After picking myself up, brushing off the fine shards, I beckoned to Benjamin Black/John Banville, holding my goose-pimpled arms forward and upwards in a gesture of flight. It was time to deliver him back to the quiet solitude of his cave, an action given greater resonance by the noisy kerfuffle now erupting within the boisterous confines of the London Review Bookshop. ♦



My Father's House

Bernardine Evaristo tours her childhood home

I don't really write about my own life in my books, with the exception of my verse novel 'Lara', which was based on my family history. I do have a blog, though, so I suppose that counts although you won't find anything intimate or confessional in it. In our current climate the boundaries between public and private have become increasingly blurred, especially with the latest craze of Twitter with millions of people declaring to the world such inanities as 'I have just eaten a cheese roll' or 'It's sunny outside today'. Although I have resisted this madness, I am on Facebook indulging in public conversations. Writing about myself in a short memoir piece is part of this climate of self-exposure, I think. A desire to show who I am; to reveal the real person behind the 'writer'. That said, writing can change the maker too and this piece deepened my understanding of where I came from. Not an epiphany but the past brought to life.

IGREW UP in a draughty, creaking, ramshackle detached Victorian house in Woolwich, then a garrison town in south-east London. Woolwich borders the Thames and is famous for the Royal Arsenal armaments factory, which, unfortunately, obscures the view of the river. Until the Arsenal closed in 1967, it was responsible for producing most of the military weaponry for most of the British wars over a 300-year period. And that's as interesting as it gets. It's a dingy little town really and I've long had a hate-hate relationship with it, not because it's a terrible place, but simply because it was so boring. In my younger, (slightly) more pretentious days, I used to declare that Woolwich was my home town, but Notting Hill was my spiritual homeland. With hindsight I now think that living in a boring place and enduring those long, lukewarm summers where I went nowhere and did little was one of the ingredients that made me a writer — someone who escapes into the weird and wonderful territory of the imagination.

There were eight kids in my family, which was a bit over the top, don't you think? My English mother was a devout Catholic and so wanted as many souls as

possible to be saved in heaven, and as an only child she'd always dreamed of having a large family of her own. My Nigerian father went along with it. We were, after all, proof of his manhood. And so over ten years we skidded, slipped, struggled and bawled our way into the world: girl, girl, boy, girl (me), boy, girl, boy, boy. I like to think I suffer from middle-child syndrome. (Notice me! Notice me! Why, oh why, does *everyone else* get all the attention. It's NOT fair . . . sulk.)

Heck, you know what? I'm so over it.

No. 173 Eglinton Road was next door to Notre Dame Convent School and it had once been used as part of the school. It had four floors, twelve rooms, a sizeable front garden and a terraced back garden 150 feet long. If it sounds amazing, don't be fooled: it was a dump. A great big, falling-apart monstrosity which stood out like a carbuncle from all the other smaller, well-kept houses on our suburban street. Jesus! There wasn't even a high wall or trees to obscure it. Tell a lie, there *was* a tree in the early days, but my father chopped it down for some reason. My father was fond of chopping down trees and other objects. I think he had a man-against-nature thing going on.

My parents bought No. 173 for £1900 in 1960 and it needed work but they couldn't afford it. Then, when they could have applied to Greenwich Council for a home improvement grant, my pathologically suspicious father decided he wasn't going to let some cowboy builder rip us off, and insisted on renovating the property himself. This he did badly, if at all. He poured concrete on to the front garden to make it more manageable, except that big cracks soon appeared, giving it a certain post-earthquake vibe. One summer he built a garage next to the house, which we were all excited about, except the end product resembled a corrugated shack from the shanty towns of Brazil. Instead of parking his newly purchased old banger of a Vauxhall Victor in the garage, however, he kept it outside, preferring to show it off as a status symbol.

He drove it, even though he didn't have a licence and had never taken a lesson or a test. Then it just sat there for years and got progressively crusty until bits started falling off.

Our imposing but dilapidated front door had two church-like windows. In 1975 my father blowtorched the door prior to painting it. Scarred and streaked, it looked a right state and was to remain thus for the rest of its natural life — another twenty years or so. It was, like everything else to do with the house, embarrassing. Mr Futter the builder, who lived directly opposite us in a pristine white house, never once said hello in all the decades we were neighbours. Fucking Futter, I called him, although not to his face and never in front of my parents. Swearing was not allowed. Looking back, I guess we did halve the market value of his own property.

The back garden was wild before the concept became fashionable. On one side was the convent's vegetable garden, separated by a fence, and on the other side ran a long alleyway with wide steps. Indeed the back of the house stood on top of a very steep hill and the bottom of the garden merged into some hilly woodland. Well, perhaps woodland is a slight exaggeration. It wasn't Epping Forest exactly, but the woods were a strange no man's land which seemed to belong to no one. We kids didn't venture too far into it. It was always dark in there, slippery, precipitous and home to dangerous wildlife like hooting owls and foxes. At night the woods were a creepy, malevolent presence.

My father built a wall down the alley side of the garden, but the workmanship was such that the brickwork soon crumbled and it looked as if someone had gone at it with a sledgehammer. And so it was to remain.

We had a garden full of trees: sycamores, oaks and pairs of apple, cherry and pear trees, which at some stage my father chopped down intending to do 'something' with the land. He always had plans. The garden was left treeless and looking like an abandoned airfield. I still grieve for those trees, and the swings attached to them. One of my sisters once dropped a brick on me from up a cherry tree, cutting my head open. I was five at the time and wearing a cowboy hat, which she cited, rather disingenuously, as

her defence. She thought the hat would protect me. Oh, really?

Every summer we were ordered out into the garden with machetes to chop down the grass, which grew above our heads. We loathed having to spend summer days in manual labour, muttering that we were being treated like the slaves in the new telly series *Roots*. What was the point when it was all going to quickly grow back and be left to wilt? But we never dared question our father's authority. His was a military dictatorship.

The Woolwich I grew up in had a majority white population. Today it could be called be called Little Lagos. The transformation is astonishing. Back then there was only one other family of colour in our street, and our house was an easy target for racist kids who were always throwing rocks at our back windows from the alleyway. I spent my childhood waiting for missiles to be hurled into the room whilst watching *Ironsides* or *Top of the Pops*. My father would chase the little bastards, haul one or even two of them (he was strong) by the scruff of their necks (it was allowed) and drag them to their homes for punishment and recompense. The parents were usually apologetic and even if not my father made them cough up or threatened to go to the police, which he sometimes did. To his dying day my father slept with a hammer at his side.

One Sunday morning, before the wall was built, my parents woke up to find some boys stripping the wooden fence which ran down by the alley. They said it was firewood for Bonfire Night. My

father called the police, who made their parents come out and hammer back the wooden slats that very day. The boys in blue weren't always so sympathetic.

I guess we were the bogey family in the neighbourhood.

MY FATHER WAS a mighty little African, an amateur boxer back in Nigeria, and at five foot five much shorter than me or his six-footer sons. He was slim, muscular, and even in old age had the kind of tiny waist most women would die for. He ate vast amounts of porridge directly out of a saucepan for breakfast, nothing but a cup of tea for lunch, and at night a big meal which he cooked himself – meat and potatoes mashed together like baby food. He never ate desserts and never snacked. He also never drank the water we're supposed to throw down our gullets in copious amounts every day. That explains why he never had a day's illness, then.

He was a quick, jaunty walker and seen from behind you'd easily knock fifteen years off his age. But he was fierce to us kids, a devotee of the cult of corporal punishment; we were terrified of him. To the outside world, however, he was charismatic, gregarious, a bit of a joker, an active socialist and a local councillor who was always willing to help people. In eighteen years of living in the same house I never once had a proper conversation with him. He only spoke to reprimand us, and that usually involved hour-long lectures where we had to stand still and look suitably remorseful. We weren't allowed out on to the street to play, and visits to see friends were severely restricted. If I wanted to go to a party I'd have to ask him about three weeks in advance, listen with my heart thumping to a lecture about the perils of this or that, and then hear him say no. It was easier not to ask. No. 173 was his fiefdom and it sometimes felt like my prison. I realize now that he had to be a disciplinarian in order to keep his tribe out of trouble, that his parenting skills were the best he had to offer, and that he was frightened for us. The England he'd sailed into in 1949 was a hostile place for black people, and the London of the seventies could be treacherous for black children, especially boys. It was only as an adult that I was able to communicate with him, and yes, love him.

As antidote to my father, my mother

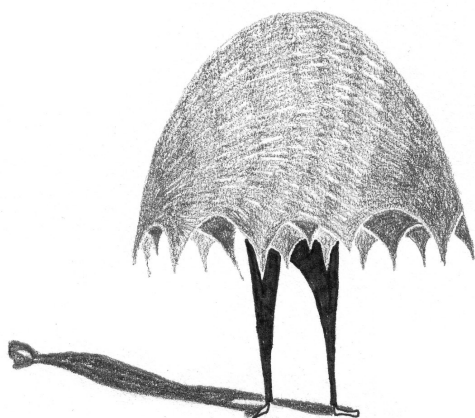
was warm, cuddly, chatty, accessible and loving. If she made it to sit down and watch telly with us in the evenings, we'd fight each other over who would scratch her back with a special backscratcher, or massage her tired feet. As a compromise we'd take a foot each. She pleaded with our father to be softer on us, which sometimes had the desired effect. I escaped to the local youth theatre every Friday night aged twelve, allowed because only 'nice' kids went there. It was my saviour.

The kitchen was in the dungeon-like basement, which had a passage leading on to the back garden. The basement and kitchen walls were made of concrete and so damp that water trickled down them; the floor was gritty concrete. Both were to remain ever thus. How my mother managed without disposable nappies, a washing machine, a fridge, or any of the mod cons we take for granted today, is beyond me. My father earned little as a welder and my mother, a teacher, did not resume work until the youngest was old enough for school. They were, in a word, brassic. In spite of this my mother made sure we were well fed, counting out the lettuce leaves, fruit and vegetables so that it all went round. We grew strong, healthy and were rarely ill.

The dank coal cellar in the basement served as the household fridge for milk, birthday jellies and the meat my father bought in Woolwich on a Saturday. The bathroom was also in the basement, a nice spacious room which could have contained about eight baths – only it never had a door and it never had a bath. My father did buy one, but it stood upended against a wall for a couple of decades.

The house was blessed with a wide central staircase with wooden banisters which were perfect for almost breaking your neck on when you slid down and flew off the end, landing splat on the hard floor. The house was a great playground and in our younger years we were all playmates.

None of the hallways were wallpapered or painted, a difficult task in itself when the main hall was some thirty feet high, nor were the splintery wooden stairs carpeted, at a time when this was *de rigueur* in suburbia. I went to sleep dreaming of *formica* and *linoleum* and *pebble-dash* and a whole *bicycle* for myself rather than an eighth of one. As soon as we were old



enough, pairs of Evaristo children had to take it in turns to clean the communal areas every Saturday. The house, for all its defects, was always very clean. As were we: my mother made sure her children were always nicely turned out.

On the first floor was the large 'Best Room', which in most households would be called the living room. This was where we gathered every night to watch telly, while my mother was invariably downstairs in the basement boiling, like, a hundred nappies in a huge pail on the stove. The Best Room had a gas fire, marble mantelpiece and carpet. It was cosy but often claustrophobic, what with eight kids squashed up on the sofa, and four boys who wore their flatulence like a badge of pride, trying to outdo each other. Not funny, especially when it goes on every day for *years*. The décor of the Best Room was the *pièce de résistance* of No. 173. My genius sister was allowed to act on a brainwave one summer and decorate the room. This she did by cutting up thousands of colourful women's magazines into tiny squares and pasting them on to the walls. The end result was a colourful collage which covered the entire room. We all approved. It looked amazing.

Next to the Best Room was the even larger but abandoned 'Front Room', which was the dumping ground for the household junk. It, too, was without a door and as it was dark, spooky and cavernous at night, I used to rush past it in order to go upstairs to bed, afraid that unspeakable creatures would lurch out and get me. The Front Room had two antique pianos, one with fanciful brass candlestick holders attached. None of us played the piano but we liked to tinker with it occasionally. One year my father decided that they too had to be chopped down, so he lugged those lovely pianos into the garden, hacked away and burnt them in a bonfire. Why? Don't ask. Maybe he just got fed up of hearing a one-finger rendition of 'Frère Jacques' played for the zillionth time.

The only toilet was on this floor too. You had to queue, and then when it was your turn, you had to be quick because someone else would be waiting outside. To this day people comment on my ability to pee at speed. I can be in and out of the loo in a minute.

Next floor up were three of the bedrooms. When we were old enough we were paired off according to age and gender. On this floor the four boys had two bedrooms and my parents had theirs. My three sisters and I had the two sloping attic rooms at the top, where there was also a washroom, and an unconverted attic space which had rafters but no floorboards. One day my father was doing 'something' in the attic when his foot slipped and he fell through to the floor below. A gaping hole was left in the ceiling. It was never repaired. Of course it wasn't.

Aged five I began to share a bedroom with my younger sister. As we got older we didn't get on and were always rushing downstairs in tears to complain to our mother about the other one. As a teenager I tormented her by reading aloud every night, loving the sound of my own booming, melodramatic voice reciting poetry or speeches from plays. It wasn't *my* problem that she wanted to sleep. It was only when we left home that we became friends. The two sisters next door put a piece of string down the room dividing their space.

We hardly ever had visitors. My mother's friends had all emigrated to that exotic place called Abroad, and most of her family didn't want anything to do with her when she married someone from the lowest form of humanity, an African. My mother's mother, who did everything in her power to stop my parents' marriage, was too upset at how we lived to visit often. She had raised herself above her working-class Irish-English origins and become a homeowner and dressmaker, and fancied herself a bit middle class. (How, exactly, when her husband was a milkman is beyond me.) She'd had high hopes that my mother, her only child, who had received a scholarship to a private school, would become a fully paid-up member of the middle classes. She never got over her disappointment. My grandmother had only one photo of a grandchild in her house: of my eldest sister when she was a tiny tot. She loved us, her only grandchildren, but she was ashamed of our colour.

We did, however, have lodgers when I was very young. My parents threw out one young woman when they discovered she was sedating her baby with whisky so

that she could go play with the soldiers in Woolwich. Another lodger, male, got into a fight with my father, and was evicted. Then there was the family from India. My parents had arranged to lodge this Goan family, assuming there would be only one or two kids. They turned up in the middle of the night, having disembarked from a boat at Southampton, and my parents could not believe it when thirteen children, plus Mum and Dad, trooped one by one into the hallway. Hail to my parents, because they let *all* of them stay for weeks until the older ones found work and lodgings elsewhere. Seven of them remained with us for two years.

The only friend I invited home was my best friend Jenny, still a great friend, who lived in what seemed to my child's eyes to be a mini Moorish palace up a winding private drive in salubrious Blackheath – the poshest part of south-east London. Her gorgeous house had a beautiful parquet floor so polished it was as slippery as an ice rink. Even today I cringe at what she thought of my neo-Munster abode.

My mother tried her best to get my father to improve our home, but he was the stubborn patriarch and his will prevailed. It was, to a certain extent, a clash of cultures. She was from a country which believed that 'an Englishman's home is his castle', and he was from a country that wasn't England. A lot of life is lived outside in tropical Nigeria, and people have more pressing concerns than cultivating the perfect rose bush or painting the house every few years. I only realized this when I visited Nigeria for the first time in 1991 and discovered that some of my father's behaviour wasn't specific to him, but cultural. As a child I'd known nothing about his culture or traditions, although in some respect I now thank God for small mercies. To have to kneel or prostrate myself in front of my elders would have made me want to kill myself.

No. 173 doesn't exist now. It was sold off in the early nineties to a developer who demolished it and built a block of flats on the land.

Given the choice, would I have changed my childhood? Different house? Different father? Fewer siblings? At the time – you betcha!

But now? Not for all the tea in China. ◇

Whiff

Can a surfer be Iggy Pop and Ivan Lendl at once? By Jamie Brisick

It started out of sheer desperation. I was a pro surfer with inflated self-importance, my career ended abruptly, I began writing for surf magazines that encouraged the first person, and thus the last seventeen years of journalism and my present memoir-in-progress. On a good day, writing about my life is the most sublime, cathartic, godly, and honest thing I could ever imagine doing. I love how a trickle of a memory from twenty or thirty years ago will flood back in vivid, visceral detail. Sometimes it's about confronting issues and tragedies evaded at the time; others it's merely to revisit the nape of his or her neck. On a bad day, however, it's narcissistic and unimaginative. My pathetic life plays back like some annoying Top 40s jingle that lodges in the head and won't leave. Most of my friends and family have been supportive, though my older brother is opposed to it, and has asked to be removed from certain scenes. By no means does this liberate the writing. I'm merciless with myself and take great pleasure in revisiting my countless blunders, but a lot more careful when it comes to others.

I WAS SEVENTEEN and delusional and Carl Lewis was breaking world records and the Stones had just released *Dirty Work* and godhead Gordon Gekko was proclaiming “Greed is good!” and I blame all the above for my foolishness. That and the fact that I had my eyes on a pro surfing career, sixteen years of Catholicism which manifested in binge/purge self-flagellation, and a sun-drenched short attention span, which is to say that one day I'd read about Ivan Lendl's intense training program in *Tennis* and go sprint a few miles on soft sand, and the next I'd become possessed by Iggy Pop's *Raw Power* and aspire to challenge myself on more, shall we say, psychotropic fronts. The tug of war — or better yet, the head-on collision — of these conflicting ideologies never dawned on me. I repeat: I was seventeen and delusional.

So I'm at a friend's girlfriend's Pepperdine University graduation lunch at an upscale French restaurant in Malibu, nibbling a *tarte à la tomate* and sipping Dom Perignon, when my pal Teddy kicks me

under the table, nods in the direction of the men's room, wipes his hands with his flamingo pink cloth napkin, and excuses himself.

I obediently follow him through the “WC” door and into the toilet stall.

“A little sumpin' sumpin' before the main course,” he says, and pulls from his sport coat a wrap of the white stuff.

He deftly scoops up a tiny mound with his overgrown pinky fingernail and I — *fffff* — snort it right up, nearly swallowing his finger in the process. He does the same, we check ourselves in the mirror, snuffle like a couple of flu-addled Eskimos, then join the Last Supper-like table with smug grins.

I should tell you that aside from the time Cousin Pete and I rubbed a bit of residue on our gums when we were thirteen and Dogtown-obsessed, I'd never properly done cocaine. I'd heard it referenced in endless songs (Clapton, Stones, Grandmaster Flash), I knew about Belushi's last hurrah in *Bungalow #3*, and I'd seen Woody Allen's famous sneeze scene in *Annie Hall*, but I hadn't a clue about its euphoric properties, how divinely agreeable it was with my inhibited, inferiority complex-ridden temperament.

Pre-men's room I was surrounded by a bunch of preppy, Benz's-on-their-sixteenth-birthdays, spoiled rich kids. Post-men's room I could not have felt more for Carolyn with the nose job and pretentious table manners, Joel with the hairy chest, gold chain and suspicious tan, and Sophia who lunched at the Ivy, summered in the Hamptons, and failed to make eye contact with our affable Hispanic waiter. These were my co-conspirators. I wanted to *mmmmwah, mmmmwah* them on both cheeks, stick my tongue in their ears, make confessions.

We picked at our salads and chattered excitedly. There was talk of all night cramming for finals, Sunday afternoon martini gatherings at Bianca's parents' Colony house, and the best hotels to stay at during Cannes. Shortly after the

grilled Norwegian salmon steak with champagne-raspberry sauce arrived, Teddy gave the secret nod, and then again prior to the *crème brulee* and espresso. We inhabited a world far from sororities, Aspen winters, summer internships at Paramount and William Morris; we were essentially beach bums with decent cutbacks and logo-bedecked thrusters, but thanks to the gak, we were all team spirit, charming the pants off our friend's girlfriend's grandma, tapping glasses with tea spoons and making toasts, spouting on about new chapters and golden futures.

The party moved over to the graduating girl's beachfront apartment on Malibu Road, which could easily have been a set from *Wall Street* or *Less Than Zero* or a west coast *Bright Lights, Big City*. Nagel prints covered the walls of the track-lit living room, Wham! played on the stereo, mulleted men in shoulder-padded Armani suits cavorted on the black leather sofa with frost-tipped women in Thierry Mugler dresses while the waves slapped and hissed a mere tennis ball's toss away. That I would attend parties that would parody this heyday of mine twenty years down the track was of course far beyond my myopic imagination. We wore our Zinka and Jimmy'Z and Reebok high-tops with total conviction. Self-irony was beyond us.

There were a good eight or ten more snorts throughout the night. Teddy was a huge hit. I was so naïve that it took about five handoffs of those tiny triangular wraps for me to figure out that he was dealing the stuff. I remember huddles around the glass coffee table, rolled up hundred dollar bills, index fingers smearing upper gums, single nostril sniffles, cum-like beads of dripping snot, and senseless, hypercharged conversation. I remember tapping my feet to Sheila E's “The Glamorous Life” and grinding my teeth to Depeche Mode's “Just Can't Get Enough.”

I never danced. Unfortunately, I spent my teens and twenties thinking that dancing was uncool, which cost me dearly on the sexual front. In fact when I stop to ponder this now I imagine myself a kind of forty-year-old Ebenezer Scrooge being led by the Ghost of Summers Past, only instead of neglectful fathers and Tiny Tims, there are curvaceous blondes in cut-off pink sweatshirts and sleek bru-

nettes in fishnets and push-up bras smack-
ing gum and calling me to the dance floor
with determined, pink nail polished index
fingers, and instead of whimpering with
regret like Scrooge, I slug myself in the
jaw repeatedly.

There was no sleep that night. The six
or seven of us who were too jacked to
drive grabbed pillows and writhed in fetal
positions on couches, bean bag chairs, and
the faux zebra skin throw rug. I remem-
ber listening to the ocean, the couple
having sex in the next room, the drill ser-
geant-like voice of my guilty conscience.
The NSSA Nationals were a couple
months off and what the hell was I doing
going on a fifteen-hour cocaine, cham-
pagne, beer and vodka bender? Had I not
been so wired up I may have been able to
sleep my way back to common sense, but
as it were I spiraled into self-disgust. I felt
that same dirty feeling I felt after sleeping
with bad perfumed, cigarette-smoking
valley girls I was philosophically at odds
with. Which left one obvious solution:
Go surfing.

I tip-toed out of the house and hopped
into my powder blue '66 Karmann Ghia
I'd bought a few months prior from Mur-
ray, a Third Point hero, who, when he'd
handed over the keys, said "I'm just happy
to let her go to someone who can surf,"
which paralleled that final scene in *Big
Wednesday* when Matt Johnson passes his
board onto the wide-eyed gremmie, only
in this case there was money involved:
two grand cash. It was a great first car. I
distinctly remember the "St. Christopher
Be My Guide" button resined onto the
center of the steering wheel, and the
"Live to Ride, Ride to Live" wings stuck
on the back window, which even fur-
thered the sense that I was being sworn in,
that the keys were to something far more
than just a car.

I burned past the high tide shorebreak
of Zuma which six or seven times a year
transforms into North Shore-like per-
fection, careened through the curves of
Point Mugu where minus tides coupled
with strong north wind swell gave us
tiny glimpses of Queensland pointbreaks,
whirred past the farmlands and domestic
abuse-addled barrios of Oxnard where
Mexican hookers with pot bellies ped-
dled their skanky wares in front of the
paderia at lunchtime, then turned left into
Ventura Harbor where Santa Clara River-

mouth's shapely sandbars drew commit-
ted waveriders from Rincon to Trestles.

But it was unsurfable. There was swell,
but the tide was so high and sandbar so
deep that, rather than break, the waves
would double up into a heaping shore-
pound. And so I did what I always did
when my conscience was eating at me and
the surf was uncooperative: I ran beach
sprints. Sweat out the sins of last night,
I reasoned. Good things come to those
who train.

This is where, with hindsight of course,
I envisage Lendl and Iggy at war. The
tennis racket vs. the microphone stand.
Snowy white Adidas shorts and shoes vs.
beer-soaked Levis and Doc Martens. Only
I had nothing in common with either. I
was a sensitive, hungry suburbanite des-
perate to scale my way out of the mire of
mediocrity.

I stripped down to my skintight lycra
boardshorts, smeared a gob of Bullfrog
across my nose, popped something like
AC/DC's *Back In Black* in my mustard
yellow Walkman, and began trotting
toward the rivermouth. I hadn't had a
sip of water since, what, lunch
yesterday? I sprinted and sprinted
and sprinted. I'd set my eyes on
a piece of driftwood or Doritos
bag fifty yards ahead and make
that my goal. I huffed up the
fertilizer-scented offshore breeze,
I felt my heart banging against
my breastbone, I wiped the salty
sweat from my forehead. And
then after forty minutes, when I
felt good and purged, I got back
in my Ghia and headed home.

The 101 from Ventura to our
house in Westlake Village was
a good thirty-minute drive.
Denny's, auto malls, monolithic
shopping centers, miniature golf
courses, and farmlands lined the
highway. It was like a pendulum
of lukewarm America swinging
back and forth before my eyes.

The fatigue set in right around
the Camarillo Grade, a bru-
tally steep, two-mile incline that
forced me into the slow lane. By
Newbury Park I was fighting
to keep my eyes open and by
Thousand Oaks I was letting out
blood-curdling screams every
half-mile or so to scare myself

back to wakefulness. When I got off the
freeway at Hampshire Road I felt a huge
wave of relief. Pass the Kmart with the
grindable banks, pass the cul de sac where
Brittany the magical French kisser lived,
pass the mini mall where Ron kicked the
shit out of the black belt in 10th grade,
and I was home. I was mentally rehears-
ing my arrival: toss board and wetsuit in
garage, wash feet with hose, plop face
down in bed. . .

I remember urgent voices, blinding light,
and stale coffee breath. I can't recall
whether the "How many fingers?" actu-
ally happened or whether this was pasted
over from some TV or movie I'd seen, but
such is the nature of memory in the 21st
century. I remember a tray of medical
supplies, a defibrillator, a greenish curtain
pulled shut, and then I remember reach-
ing down to ensure that my legs were still
there, feeling a surge of powerful emo-
tion, as if I'd just been through something
traumatic, though I had no idea what.

"Do you know where you are?" asked
the bearded doctor.



"I was driving and, umm. . ."
"You've been in a car accident. You went head-on into a tree."

"Wha —"
"Your car's totaled. Fortunately you didn't hit anyone. Can you remember anything?"

I tried, but my thoughts were muddled, jellylike. I muttered an "Umm —"

"You were at a stop light. The woman in the car next to you says you were convulsing, as in having a seizure. Are you epileptic?"

"No."
"Have you had seizures in the past?"
"No."
"Any serious head injuries or migraines?"
"No."

"Relatives with epilepsy, seizure disorders?"

"No, not that I know of," I said, then after a brief inner debate gushed it all: "Look, I did cocaine last night. Like a lot of it. I think we started around two in the afternoon and didn't stop 'til well past midnight. I also drank a lot of vodka and didn't sleep and then went running —"

There were X-Rays, EEGS, CAT scans, and various blood tests. It appeared that there was nothing wrong with me, though there was a slight blemish in one of the brain scans, which looked exactly how my seizure felt: bright, overexposed, like staring into the sun for too long. The doctor said it could easily have been a flaw in the machinery, but to be safe he prescribed me 500 mg of Dilantin, which I diligently popped every morning for four years.

Because Karmann Ghias have the engine in the rear and boot in the front, the tree trunk tore into the metal unobstructed, leaving a vicious "V" and mangling the axle. I ended up selling it to a junkyard in Van Nuys for something like fifty bucks. I can still see the black metal dashboard and steering wheel that got scalding hot in the summer, the ancient AM radio with chrome buttons, the oval glove compartment door that had a habit of falling open whenever I went over a bad bump. I regret not taking some kind of memento — the rear view mirror or that ironic St Christopher button.

I hitchhiked for the next year. It wasn't easy getting rides with a six-foot surfboard, but in retrospect, it set me on a kind of slow-paced, experiential journey

that ran counter to the linear, blinkered path of competitive surfing. I vividly recall getting picked up by the disgruntled, wolf-faced longhair in the jacked up, primer black Chevy truck who blasted Journey, chugged Miller Lite, complained incessantly about his "fuckin' bitch of an old lady," and essentially fuelled my determination to be a pro surfer and thus transcend this sort of pathetic behavior.

Along the palm tree-lined stretch of Palisades Park in Santa Monica, I got a lift from a balding, stone-faced gentleman in a candy apple red Mercedes 450SL convertible. He wore loud sunglasses and a purple bandana around his neck. After requisite small talk (he lived in Beverly Hills, worked "in the film business"), he turned to me and asked, "So, are you bored?"

"No," I said. "Not at all."
A mile up Pacific Coast Highway he asked again, and then a mile after that a third time, adding a suggestive scan of my midsection.

"What do you mean by bored?" I asked, anxious to get it out on the table.

"I'm gay," he said. "I like men. I'm attracted to you."

I told him I was straight, that I felt uncomfortable, that I wanted to get out.

He pulled off on Sunset Boulevard and let me out in front of a Taco Bell.

"Thanks for the lift," I said, then punkishly added, "Hope you get your dick sucked."

As if I'd misunderstood him, as if this would suddenly change everything, he looked at me with hopeful eyes. "I meant" — he nodded toward my groin — "me sucking you."

I politely slammed the door.

To further LA clichés, I had a commercial agent at the time and went on auditions that were forty miles from my suburban home. With luck I'd get picked up by a commuter headed downtown; on a bad day it would involve six or seven short lifts, a couple bus rides, and a lot of walking. I'd pack up my headshot, Thomas Guide, a thin paperback, and a large bottle of orange Gatorade, and set off three hours before call time. I met insurance salesmen, prostitutes, Deadheads, and an alarming number of middle-age men with seemingly no destination.

Through my entertainment industry friends I would attend elegant parties in

the Hollywood Hills and Malibu Colony, some of which I'd arrive at either by foot or benevolent stranger in jalopy. The contrast between standing on the side of the road with my thumb out, to suddenly sipping expensive scotch poolside in the backyard of some stately mansion was bewildering.

My life would take on a similar duality in coming years. There'd be spartan, humble life at home and glamorous, fantasy world on the road. There'd be my older brother's descent into heroin, and subsequent rehabs, prison stints, suicide attempts, and eventual death; and then there'd be monthlong gallivants along the shores of sun-kissed foreign countries that'd include fierce battles against the world's best surfers, vivacious, caramel-skinned groupies, and a moment of rapture in Durban, where a beach full of adoring fans would applaud me and my fellow semi-finalists as we're drenched in champagne and confetti.

My Lendl/Iggy complex would dog my career. I'd wash down my 500 mg of Dilantin with soymilk, ginseng, bee pollen, and sub-lingual B-12 in the morning, then knock back Jack Daniels and Cokes and smoke bong loads at night. I'd do cocaine exactly two more times: once at a house party in Sydney, where I'd snort a thin, caterpillar-like line and feel a surge of euphoria then fall flat on my face, killing the collective buzz and feeling hideously embarrassed; and again at a Fourth of July party in Venice Beach, where I told myself I was just making sure I wasn't allergic, then came to with a stranger slapping me in the face and the entire party peering down at me. A ginger-haired medical student took me into the bedroom, gave me a glass of water, and checked my pulse. She sat down in the adjacent leather chair, assumed a cross-legged, shrink-like position, and asked, "So, you want to tell me what's really going on with you?"

When I revisit these scenes now it all comes back: the hubristic highs and gutter-licking lows, the sense of being a Superman one day and a total fraud the next, the quest for self-mastery but also that strange titillation with self-sabotage. And while it's tempting to cast this as some tormented youth from which I've fully emerged, truth is, I still wrestle these same elephants. ◇

I'm a Mormon

Elna Baker brings her faith to the wilds of New York

I didn't intend to make a career out of writing about myself. It all started when I was a chubby kid and I discovered that telling stories was the only way I could seem to make friends. As soon as I picked up on this gift, I immediately started to pimp it out. I would go from cafeteria table to cafeteria table repeating the same story word for word, acting as though I were telling it off the cuff each time. Eventually I began to write my stories down. In the same way that repeating these stories helped me arrive at a purer version of myself, writing them has helped me find my voice. With each draft this voice has gotten clearer and clearer. Only instead of a table of enthralled children, it's just me writing to myself, occasionally interrupted by the sound of my own laughter.

WHEN I MOVED to New York City, at the age of eighteen, I was kind of on the fence about whether I wanted to be Mormon anymore. I obviously didn't tell my parents this; my mother was already terrified. To her, New York was the city from the movies made in the seventies, where you heard gunshots out your window and pimps screaming at hos. (Not that there were many scenes like that in the PG-rated movies my mother was inclined to watch.) But still New York was a scary, dangerous place. A month before I went off to college she sat me down for a mother-daughter talk.

'Elna,' she said nervously. 'The first thing that will happen when you move to New York is, you might start to swear.'

I wanted to say, 'Oh shit, really?' But I knew that only my dad would think that was funny. Instead I humoured her by simply nodding my head and saying, 'Mmm-hmm.'

'And Elna,' she continued, 'swearing will lead to drinking.'

I had somehow missed the connection. 'And drinking will lead to doing drugs.'

The conversation was starting to get more amusing than even I had anticipated. 'And Elna,' she said, pursing her lips and looking directly into my eyes, 'What would you do if a lesbian tried to make out with you?'

I had heard of the term 'doing a double take', but I didn't think double takes existed until that moment. I turned my head back and forth and looked at my mother as if I were seeing her for the first time. I was used to her saying words like 'church calling', 'relief society' and 'bishopric meeting'. Not the word 'lesbian', let alone 'lesbian' and 'make out' in the same sentence. It was awesome. But I was also slightly offended. If you followed my mother's logic, each step was a progression toward becoming more of a sinner. First I'd swear — then I'd drink — then I'd do drugs; by that point I was getting used to the narrative so I assumed sex would be next. But no — my mother skipped that altogether and jumped to my becoming a lesbian. Did my mother honestly think that I had a better chance of getting action from a woman than a man?

These are all questions I didn't ask her directly. But at this point I'd almost forgotten she'd asked me a question: what would I do if a lesbian tried to make out with me?

She was sitting there, arms folded, waiting for an answer.

'I'd say, *No, thank you . . . lesbian,*' I offered. My mother rolled her eyes and gave me an 'I'm being serious, Elna, look.'

'There's one more thing,' she said, resuming our heart to heart.

Sex with men, sex with men, sex with men.

'There are these clubs in New York where men pay women to dance with very little clothing on; *don't do that.*'

Our mother-daughter talk ended with that golden nugget of wisdom. I left thinking, *Great, my mom thinks I'm moving to the big city to become a lesbian stripper. What else is new?*

MY PARENTS DROVE me to the airport in silence; it was as if they were sending me off to war. At the very least, I expected a tender goodbye, but this was interrupted when the check-in clerk announced that my bag was too heavy. My father opened it in the middle of the terminal. I watched as he pulled out items of senti-

mental value, told me I didn't need them and threw them away.

That's when my mother saw it, amongst my tightly folded clothes: a rainbow scarf — the confirmation of her deepest fear. I wasn't keeping it from her. I'd owned it for several years, and had purchased it because it reminded me of Punky Brewster in a retro 80s sort of way. She snatched it out of my suitcase,

'You can't wear this in New York!' she exclaimed.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Everyone will think that you're gay.'

My mother thought gay people had a monopoly on rainbows. In my opinion rainbows are for everyone, just like unicorns.

'Mom, I'm not gay,' I responded.

'I know, but you should avoid the appearance.'

'That's why I bleach my mustache.'

She rolled her eyes and gave me another, *'I'm being serious, Elna, look.'*

I tried to get my scarf back. I told her how much I liked it. I explained how cold I would be without it. I even tried to clue her in on this century by explaining that wearing rainbows didn't automatically mean a person was gay. The Lucky Charms leprechaun was not a homosexual. The Care Bear with the rainbow on his tummy did not have a life partner. Eventually my mom gave me money to buy a new scarf. But she was not, under any circumstances, going to let me take the rainbow scarf to New York City.

We hugged goodbye at the security gate. I swung my backpack over my shoulder and joined the line. Just as I was about to go through the metal detector, I turned around and waved.

'Remember who you are,' my mother shouted. *Remember who you are, Remember who you are,* echoed through the hall of Heathrow. I still laugh when I think about it. Not because of the message, but because my mother was quoting the slogan of an old church campaign. I even have a *Remember who you are* key chain — they gave them to the youth. I've never used mine though, I was always worried someone would see it and think I had Alzheimer's.

WHEN I WALKED into my dorm room the first thing I noticed was a big rainbow flag hanging on the wall. It didn't scare me; it made me laugh. *Of course,* I thought, *after*

all of my mom's worrying, of course I'm going to be living with someone gay. The only way it could possibly get better would be if my roommate walked in smoking a cigarette and offered to give me a lap dance.

I'd never actually met a lesbian until I met my roommate Sarah. We were both each other's firsts. As it turned out Sarah had never met a Mormon until she met me. And despite all the things we were supposed to be, we hit it off right from the start. We complained about the size of our bathroom, and we played Ani DiFranco at full volume while we hung clothes in our tiny closet.

Over the course of the year, I never once felt uncomfortable. That isn't true. The only time I ever felt uncomfortable was when Sarah brought home a prosthetic male 'piece'. It was rather large, a strap-on, and a disgusting salmon color (I'd obviously never seen one before). She wore it under her clothing, I guess to feel more in touch with her inner man, and that didn't bother me. But it was disturbing trying to do my homework when 'the thing', as I referred to it, was lying on her dresser or, better yet, the kitchen counter. I'd glance up from reading my theatre history textbook, and 'the thing' would somehow find its way into my view. It was always perched up, eager, and I swear it was watching me. I kept this information to myself, too. If my mother couldn't handle rainbows, she wasn't going to like prosthetic schlongs.

I GUESS THIS probably isn't the kind of stuff most Mormons would even acknowledge. But how can you ignore what's going on around you? That's just life. Whether you participate in it or not, your roommate is bound to wear a strap-on. I think if there's an elephant in the living room you should just make friends with it. But then again, I've always been different from most Mormons.

And, like I said, I was kind of on the fence about whether I wanted to be a Mormon or not. It was just such a big thing to be, a Mormon. It wasn't the sort of religion you could just do because you didn't want to disappoint your mom and dad. It required major commitments; it asked for my life. And while I understood that I was influenced by my Mormon upbringing, I knew that I was many other things. In addition to being Mormon, I

was Elna Baker.

I like that I think saying my name will describe exactly who I am; it's so self-involved. But I like being named Elna; as far as I know I'm the only one. I used to hate it, though. I thought it sounded like a Spanish man clearing snot from his nose. 'El - Naaaaah.' Then I learned what it meant: light. Elna comes from the Greek word Helene, which means light. When I found that out, I looked up the word 'light' in the dictionary to see if there was anything in there that described me in particular. Here's what I wrote down: 'Light: The guiding spirit or divine presence in each person,' and Light: 'Illumination derived from a source.'

I liked the second definition best. I identified with it because I always felt like I wasn't just light: I was illumination derived from a source. To me that source was God.

I find my strength in God. I pray all the time, and I feel like God is always with me. Like we hang out, and he hears my thoughts, and follows me from street to street so that everywhere I go, I'm not alone. Maybe I just do this because I don't have a boyfriend, or maybe it's true. All the same, when I look at the moon I can't help it, I immediately say, *Hi, God*.

Still, having a strong connection with God does not stop me from questioning my Mormon faith every ten seconds. Because if you look at it from an outsider's perspective, Mormonism sounds totally ridiculous. Joseph Smith receives a vision. He translates a book, The Book of Mormon. This book ends up being a history of the ancestors of the Native Americans, who originated in Jerusalem and believed in Jesus.

When you write it all out like that you can't help but reconsider. Once I tried explaining it to a friend who had made the mistake of thinking the founder of the Mormon faith was John Smith. I told him that it was actually Joseph Smith, and then I went into all the things that I believed. I thought I was doing a good job explaining everything until he said, 'So basically John Smith and Joseph Smith were two different people, but according to you Pocahontas was actually a Jew?'

Exactly.

I guess the miracles one is expected to believe in the Mormon faith are no different than the miracles you're supposed to

believe in any faith. My problem is I was always a skeptic. Here's a brief history of Mormonism and me:

When I was four and my mom first told me the story of Moses parting the Red Sea with his hands, I looked at her and said, 'Oh yeah right, Mom.' My mother tried to convince me that Moses had indeed parted a sea just by lifting his arms. I rolled my eyes and patted her on the knee like she was a crazy person.

By the age of six, I was already asking, 'When do we graduate from church?' At this point I had entered school and understood that while school was 'not fun', it was necessary. But there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Someday, many years away, I would be done with school, and the word for that was 'graduate'. To my dismay I was told that the word to describe being done with church was 'death'.

Still, I got baptized when I was eight. I went to a church summer camp every year for six years. And at age sixteen, I even went on a Mormon hiking trip where I had to dress as a pioneer and push a hand-cart up a mountain (if you think that this was my idea, you've seriously misinterpreted me - my mother signed me up). I've read the Book of Mormon and on Sundays I always go to church.

And so at this point, I know how to be a Mormon. I know all the answers to all the questions. I know how to sound, and I know how I'm supposed to think. I've even prayed and felt answers. When I was on the church-hiking trip, we were all told to go off into the woods and pray. I found a quiet spot, and I prayed and I asked God if he existed. I felt the presence of something bigger than me during that prayer. I felt someone wrap their arms around me, as if they were hugging me, and I started to cry. As I cried, my body rocked back and forth and I knew it wasn't me who was doing it.

That experience alone should be more than enough to sustain a lifetime of faith . . . only something has always held me back: my brain.

I can't help it. I have a hard time believing that there can only be one truth: Mormonism. Because then that means every other way of seeing it is wrong. And when I look at the way other people live their lives, I don't think they're wrong. But then if I choose to believe

everyone is right and that there are many paths to one God – what’s stopping me from switching to a lax religion where it’s okay to just go to church on holidays and do whatever I want to the rest of the year? And also, how can *all of life* be explained by one thing? I mean it. It just seems so strange: I’m born, stuff happens and then I die. The purpose of church is to explain why. Only, it doesn’t quite do it for me. Life seems like something that can only be explained in the aftermath. Which means that only dead people get it, and while the Bishop, who has a tendency to drone on, sometimes seems dead – I know he isn’t.

It’s this uncertainty that overwhelms me. I’ll stand on a crowded street corner and watch people passing and I’ll wonder, *Where are we all going? What’ll happen*

when we die? What’s the point of all of this?

When I ask these sorts of questions I feel like Alice shrinking in the rabbit hole, or expanding in the tiny house. And there’s a heaviness to it, a dark tunnel that calls me, and I have to resist entering because I’m afraid if I do, I’ll go completely insane. So instead, I do what most people do: I buy ice-cream and watch *Friends*.

My dad says that I think too much, and that if I’m not careful my thoughts will undermine my faith. But that bugs me too: why did God give me reason, if I’m not supposed to use it?

BURDENED WITH this questioning mind, I figured the best thing to do was leave my church the minute I stepped off the plane. But New York City had the opposite effect on me. Instead of making me want

to let loose, it made me want to be true to myself. NYU, the college I’d enrolled in, was a school of lost children, full of kids who were ‘different’ in high school. Then the different kids decided to come to the same place, and all of the sudden being different wasn’t all that special. It was a fad. Kids were struggling to think of new ways to wear ties. It was a belt, it was an armband – as long as it wasn’t just a tie, it was a declaration of identity. The more different you were on the outside, the more different you were saying you were on the inside. But because everyone was doing it, everyone was exactly the same. Being Mormon made me different, for real – my pale-faced mother standing at the gates and the echo in the back of my mind, *Remember who you are. Remember who you are. Remember who you are.* ◇

MEMOIR – ADULTHOOD

Dark Man at the Airport

The troubling post-9/11 passport of Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

*One of the reasons I write about my life is that I think I have an interesting perspective on the world we live in. Growing up in the United States as the son of an Iranian father and a Jewish American mother, both of whom were members of the Socialist Workers Party, I always felt like an outsider. Add to this the fact that my father left home before I was one year old, and issues of my identity become even more complicated. And while it’s true that I get satisfaction and clarity from writing about my life, I don’t think it’s any easier than fiction or reportage or playwriting. Memoir can be extremely painful at times. It can also be quite embarrassing. But the key is to be able to reshape these barriers into motivating forces. I often feel a sense of liberation when I’m able to acknowledge the things I’ve lived through. My mother, who figures prominently in much of my writing, is a big supporter of what I have to say. She left the Socialist Workers Party twenty years ago and to some degree has a clear view of the past. My father, on the other hand, is still a leading member and he hasn’t spoken to me since *Granta* published an excerpt of my memoir in 2005. Well, this is one of the hazards of memoir. But I would argue that it’s worth it.*

IT WAS MY great misfortune to be traveling from New York City to Paris just two months after 9/11. For while my passport is American and clearly states that I was born in New York, there is no getting around the fact that the name printed beside the photo of a dark-haired, dark-eyed and slightly unshaven young man is ‘Sayrafiezadeh, Saeed’, *Saeed* being the variant spelling that my Iranian father and American mother chose for my birth certificate, and which subsequently became the spelling on every one of my legal documents. It was also, regrettably, the same spelling as Saeed al-Ghamdi, the twenty-one-year-old from Bahah Province, Saudi Arabia, who helped hijack United Airlines Flight 93 before it crashed into the field in southwest Pennsylvania killing all forty-four people on board.

‘You’re going to have problems at the airport,’ a friend cautioned.

‘I know,’ I said.

It made no difference, of course, that I didn’t speak one word of Persian, or that I’d never been anywhere in the Middle East, or that I was generally presumed to be Italian, or that my mother was an

American Jew from Westchester. My name doomed me to a life of being Middle Eastern. It was a name that, in the end, did not matter if it was spelled Saïd or Saeed or Syeed.

And another friend, hoping to bring some levity to my impending day of departure, suggested that after I collect my belongings at the X-ray machine I yell out, ‘My god is greatest god!’ We laughed at this.

But it reminded me of a story I once heard about two Brazilian men who had been detained at the airport under suspicion of drug smuggling. The men were completely innocent and had come to the United States for a week’s vacation, but nevertheless the authorities kept them handcuffed in an airport room, interrogating them on and off for six hours, before eventually strip-searching them. Discovering nothing, they freed them. The damage had been done, though, and the men returned to Brazil the very next day. The message, according to them, was heard loud and clear: *We don’t want you in our country.*

As for myself, I had been fully expecting to experience some form of xenophobia ever since that Tuesday morning I stood on the West Side Highway and watched the second airplane crash into the World Trade Center, hoping that it was due to some sort of mechanical failure. Later that same day, bleary and

dazed, I sat across from my girlfriend Karen at the only restaurant we could find open, and declared that being Middle Eastern in America in 2001 would soon be tantamount to being Jewish in Germany in 1939.

‘You heard it from me first,’ I said.

My prediction didn’t turn out to be true. At least not by the time Karen and I were to leave for our Thanksgiving in Paris. We had booked the vacation nearly six months in advance, and then proceeded to count the days with delicious anticipation. Now the concept of traveling was fraught. I had briefly argued for canceling our trip, but less than a week after 9/11 a friend of ours had flown to Toledo on business without incident, and then someone flew to the Bahamas, and it was quickly apparent that air travel had resumed to normal. Not to go would be an act of cowardice. Moreover, I was convinced that such behavior would only contribute to the general sense of hysteria that was slowly enveloping the country, a hysteria that would soon target every Middle Eastern person regardless of their actual nationality, parentage or place of birth. My predicament, thus, was two-fold: I was afraid of flying nearly as much as I was afraid of the airport.

And then, four days before we were to leave for Paris, American Airlines Flight 587 lost a rudder right after takeoff and crashed into Queens, killing all two hundred and sixty people on board and five on the ground.

KAREN AND I arrived at JFK on Friday evening, November 16th, three hours before our 10:55 p.m. departure, since three hours had replaced the customary two hours for international flights in order to accommodate increased security delays.

The airport was as crowded as ever. But a soldier dressed in camouflage and holding a submachine gun ambled through the concourse. I could detect an edginess in the air, as if people expected that at any moment something could happen. Karen and I stood together in the long line, slowly inching our suitcases closer to the counter. I had the distinct feeling that I was being watched by someone, somewhere. A dark man and dark woman, possibly Middle Eastern, stood in a line adjacent to ours, and as we neared

them I tried to make eye contact, wishing to convey a feeling of fraternity. In the foreground, I could see the soldier passing back and forth. His presence unnerved me. It also irritated me.

‘What’s he looking for?’ I asked Karen. ‘Blonde-haired, blue-eyed families?’ And for a moment I worried I might have said it loud enough for him to hear me.

Karen looked at the soldier and shrugged. ‘He’s just here to make people feel safe.’

I stewed silently. Then finally I said, ‘He’s adding to the hysteria.’

When it was our turn at the Air France counter, I did my best to put on a happy, confident, untroubled face which would assure the female attendant that all was well with *Sayrafiezadeh*, *Saeed* and that he had no concern whatsoever with presenting his passport.

But I could tell right away this was not going to be easy. The attendant looked at me curiously and then at my photo. I could feel the back of my neck growing moist. She typed something into the computer and then hit the return button sharply. I followed her eyes following the screen. What was she reading?

‘Traveling to Paris?’ She asked it like an accusation.

‘Yes,’ I said. A tight, crisp *yes*. A *yes* without an accent.

She typed, she waited. Her gaze was alert and mistrustful.

‘Are you checking any luggage?’

‘No.’ A casual *no*. A *no* that accentuated the *yes*. See, I’m a casual guy. Meanwhile, a steady stream of suitcases moved along the conveyer belt behind her. Endless and without interruption. A thousand black suitcases of varying sizes. A million. For so long we had all lived under the assumption that we would be safe as long as our suitcases were safe.

And then the attendant printed something out, tore it cleanly along its perforation, folded it in thirds, placed it in an envelope and said, ‘Enjoy your trip.’

Just like that?

I took the boarding passes from her and walked briskly, happily, through the concourse, passing the soldier with his submachine gun, who struck me now as a harmless, comical figure. ‘Doesn’t he kind of look like Mick Jagger?’ I asked Karen. My passport was in my back pocket and I touched it to make sure it was still there,

and then I touched it again – happy that it was an American passport. And then ashamed that I was happy. I thought of my Iranian father having to live his life beneath the heavy yoke of an Iranian passport.

At security we were greeted by an enormously overweight black man who looked exhausted. I smiled at him but he didn’t seem to care about smiles. I knew from recent articles in the *New York Times* that he earned between six and seven dollars an hour and most likely had a second job, which all worked in my favor because he appeared to have no investment in any of the documents I presented to him. He opened my passport with a slow hand and made a show of studying the picture, but just as quickly closed it, handed it back and waved us through to the line that wound towards the metal detectors. The machines beeped and beeped. Here I could feel the edginess again, the expectation. The line surged forward then stopped. Then crawled. The beeping grew more frequent. How was it humanly possible, I wondered, to catch everything? White men in white uniforms stood along a wall watching the line of people filing through. These men were definitely not the same as the underpaid security screeners. They were professionals and they meant business. Years ago the metal detector had gone off on me and as a joke I had said, ‘Don’t worry, that’s just my bomb.’ ‘I can arrest you right now,’ the guard had told me. I was eighteen and had wanted to display my wit. Instead, I had been frightened and humiliated. The guard had let me go but the lesson was learned.

My god is greatest god, popped into my head. The sad humor of how easily I could jeopardize myself. I looked at Karen, who was beginning to empty her pockets into the plastic bins. I looked at the white men in their white uniforms. I looked at the belt that I had just taken off, making my pants sag, leaving me feeling helpless and exposed like a little boy in a schoolyard. People had mocked the government’s new prohibitions on things like tweezers and straight-edged razors and cutlery as bumbling attempts by an incompetent government, but they had all missed the point that what was really being X-rayed in the end were *people*.

And I suddenly knew, without the

slightest doubt, that I was heading for trouble.

Into the plastic bin went my belt, my jacket, my wallet, my *passport*, disappearing into the dark tunnel of the X-ray machine. I watched it all float away. Karen walked through the metal detector with no sound, crossing one step closer to Paris. And then I lifted our two suitcases onto the conveyer belt and crossed through myself. There was no beep. But I knew there would be no beep. I knew that my peril was in the guards in white, who now surrounded me, three of them, asking, 'Sir, is this your luggage?' 'Sir, can we see your boarding pass?' 'Sir, are you traveling with anyone?' 'Yes,' I said. I tried for a crisp *yes*, but there was no crispness.

'This way, sir.' And I followed dutifully to a metal table where the men unzipped my suitcase, because they could unzip my suitcase if they wanted, they could search me if they wanted, they could detain me if they wanted, for years if they wanted. Because this is the reality of America post-9/11.

'Oh, that's mine,' Karen said, referring to the object in question that one of the guards held in his hand. A long, brown cylinder that indeed looked like a weapon, but in actuality was an EpiPen Auto-Injector that Karen carried everywhere because she was allergic to peaches and plums and eggplant and if she were ever to eat any by accident she would need to give herself a shot of adrenalin quickly in her thigh. She explained this to the guards and showed them the prescription from her doctor.

'Enjoy your trip,' they said.

AT THE GATE Karen and I found two seats against the wall and talked excitedly about everything we were going to do in Paris, and all the museums we were going to visit, and all the things we were going to eat. Croissants, crepes, croque-monsieurs.

'What about frogs' legs?'

We both laughed. No way! Ha ha ha. Maybe snails, though.

There was still thirty minutes before it was time to board and so we started a game of Scrabble on the little travel set that I had bought Karen for her birthday. The game was soothing and I spelled the simplest of words. I realized there had

been a pounding in my head since I first arrived at the airport and I could feel it begin to recede. An older couple sat down next to us speaking French, and Karen looked at me romantically.

Midway through the game I asked Karen if she was nervous about flying.

'No,' she said. 'Well, maybe a little.' And after a pause she asked, 'What about you?'

'No,' I said.

We played on and then Karen took a pee-break. I sat there thinking about nothing, and then I thought about whether I was afraid of flying. And suddenly, no longer having anything to worry about concerning my ethnicity or my nationality or *Sayrafiezadeh, Saeed*, I was gripped by the thought of that plane that had lost a rudder and crashed in Queens just four days earlier. And I thought also of standing on the West Side Highway on that Tuesday morning while I watched that second airplane coming over from New Jersey, growing closer and closer,

wondering if that was the airplane that was coming to put out the fire. I thought of bin Laden's declaration that Americans will never be safe until Palestinians have a homeland. And I remembered those hallucinations in the days immediately after 9/11 where I was so sure I saw planes flying too low over the city. Once I had been stricken by the sight of a blimp heading directly towards the Empire State Building, heading, heading, heading, until I realized that my depth perception was distorted and the blimp was actually miles away. And I thought of TWA Flight 800 that had plunged into the Atlantic Ocean in 1996, just twelve minutes after it had taken off from JFK. It had also been flying to Paris. I had known a woman on that plane. A friend of a friend. We had had dinner together once, just the two of us on the Upper East Side. She was rich and I was broke and I had spent the entire meal hoping she would pick up the tab, which she did. The next I heard, she had died on that plane. Everyone had suspect-



ed terrorism right away. But no, it had never been proven. I had thought of her often after that, how her body was lying somewhere on the ocean floor. How horrible it was to picture that. And how horrible it was to picture Karen and I now flying over that same ocean, at night, heading in that very same direction.

And it was then that I saw him: a young man about my age, but whose skin was a shade darker than mine. He was standing. Why was he standing, I wondered, when there were plenty of seats available. And he seemed anxious. Anxious, why? He had no luggage with him. No bag. No briefcase. No book. Who boards an eight-hour flight with nothing? He was wearing a white shirt that hung loosely past his waist, and which, to my untutored eye, had a vague Middle Eastern influence. A shirt that, under any other circumstance, I would have seen as stylish but that now seemed like a subtle warning of sorts. No, there was nothing overt about this young man, but hadn't that been the great misconception about the hijackers? That they had stood out conspicuously at the airport in their robes and turbans. In truth they had looked just like *regular* people. Regular people who happened to have dark skin and dark features and box-cutters.

For a moment I was seized by the idea that maybe this man was the twentieth hijacker I had heard spoken of. Then

I pushed that idea out of my head. Or maybe he was the twenty-first hijacker. Was there a twenty-first? And I recalled the chilling story that the actor James Woods had told about how, one month before 9/11, he had flown first class with four men who looked to be Middle Eastern. They had had no luggage either, no carry-on, no newspaper. They did not speak or eat or drink the entire flight. Instead, they sat and observed everything. Woods had told the flight attendant about his concern, and she, along with the pilot, had filed a report with the FAA, but the report had been lost beneath a mountain of reports and nothing ever came of it. And yes, Woods had confirmed later that at least two of the men on that flight in August were the ones who would later hijack the planes on 9/11.

I had disbelieved that story when I first heard it. To me it had smacked of xenophobia, told by a blatantly xenophobic man who had once referred to Arabs as 'towel heads'. But now I saw myself as James Woods. If only he could have done something more when he had seen those men. If only he could have made people listen to him. Perhaps things would have turned out differently for us.

I must say something, I thought. I must say something right now. I will go to the attendant at the counter and tell her. And if she does not believe me, I will stand on a chair and I will shout at the

top of my lungs, *Attention, everyone! There is someone among us . . .*

But what if I was wrong and falsely accused this man? The endless shame and embarrassment. He would forgive, wouldn't he? Of course he would. He would have to. We would have a good laugh about it afterwards. Him and I. Yes? I would put my arm around his shoulder and say, 'These are strange times we are living in, friend . . . brother.' And he would say, 'Strange times call for strange precautions.'

Or some such.

But what if he did not forgive me? *Could* not forgive me? Irreparable harm done to him, to his soul. Inflicted by me. I thought again of the Brazilian men and how their vacation was turned into a day of trauma. Everlasting trauma that could never be undone.

No, I must not say anything.

But what if I was *not* wrong?

And then my quandary was suddenly inflamed by the image of a thousand suitcases passing by on the conveyer belt, of a thousand people walking through the metal detectors, of a weapon that was really an EpiPen, of the Atlantic Ocean waiting in the darkness. *It is not humanly possible to catch everything.*

And then, from out of the low rumble of the airport, I heard the most frightening thing of all: 'Air France Flight 9 is now ready for boarding.' ♦

MEMOIR — THE MIDDLE YEARS

From Woodstock to Altamont

Sally Chamberlain says goodbye to 60s New York

I write memoir to make sense of my constantly changing life and to find my place in the world. From New York to the California wilderness, from India to Morocco, I'm on a search to find not just myself but everyone, everything and every place that has been a part of me.

Perhaps some of the subjects of my memoirs will react negatively and I'll have to run for the hills, but as I've tried to write with sensitivity and kindness and in certain cases disguised the guilty, I hope that won't happen and my subjects and I will laugh together over a bottle of champagne.

WHY HAD WE left New York? Were the seeds planted during the Woodstock Festival, now considered one of the milestones of the Sixties? How naive we'd been back in 1969 thinking that a rock concert could change the world.

It had started innocently enough when a friend who'd been involved in the planning gave us free passes and Wynn said we should go over to the festival for a few hours. As we left our home the Quadrangle and headed west across

the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge, I wasn't looking forward to the concert. It had been raining continuously for twelve hours with no sign of letting up and the windshield wipers on our Ford station wagon were frantically flapping back and forth as I fretted over leaving my children for a night — something I'd never done. We turned on to the road leading to Max Yasgar's farm and suddenly were in total gridlock.

'This is hopeless,' I said. 'Let's turn around and go home.'

'Where's your sense of adventure?' Wynn laughed. 'Let's see what's going on.'

The deluge turned biblical as we abandoned our station wagon by the side of the road. While trudging through the mud, clothes drenched, I plotted how to get back to the cosy Quadrangle.

At the gates we didn't have to show our passes – they were wide open and crowds were pouring in. A swell of Indian music greeted us – Ravi Shankar playing an intricate raga. As his silken chords vibrated through my body I relaxed and told myself to stop worrying about the kids – they were happy with Betsy, their trust-worthy sitter, who'd taken them home to her wonderful parents for the weekend. I looked around and realized this concert was going to be monumental.

On a sloping circular hill, an enormous crowd was sitting on the wet grass under blankets and umbrellas, watching enrapt as the best musicians of the day performed on an enormous stage at the bottom of the amphitheatre. Frustrations forgotten, we dove into the throng, puffed on communal joints and were carried off by the music. It went on all night. 'We've got to get back to the garden,' sang Crosby, Stills and Nash, followed by a pregnant Joan Baez singing 'We Shall Overcome'. Exhilaration flooded my heart. Yes, it might be possible to shed old conditioning and fears, make peace between people and change the world for the better.

Ensorcelled, we sat in the mud until Saturday morning. Black clouds still hung in the soggy air but the rain had finally stopped. Fast food and drink had run out, the roads were impassable and fresh supplies couldn't get in so we went searching for food. We wandered into a primeval dense wood where dripping trees twinkled with Christmas tree lights and gnome-like figures peeked out from wet shrubbery beckoning and murmuring, 'Hashish, pot, mushroom. Come and get 'em right here.' In a bowl-like clearing we found long tables and a small stage. The Grateful Dead, all tie-dye and blissful grins, were playing as the Hog Farm commune – big bearded men in overalls and Amazonian women in long skirts – dished out free food. I still remember how good their steamed veggies and crunchy brown rice tasted and how I vowed to learn to make food like that.

Energized, we continued exploring. As we came out of the woods the sun broke through the clouds. After the murky woods, its light was so blinding we almost fell into a tannic brown lake. Rainbows arched across naked figures, diving and leaping, or locked in ecstatic embraces.

Wynn turned to me, a huge beam on his face, and roared, 'I can die happy . . . it's all my nude paintings come to life.'

This was long before the invention of mobile phones, but somehow word spread and thousands more were walking in to become part of the fantastic happening at Yasgar's farm. Helicopters hovered over the scene, crammed with reporters and National Guardsmen expecting to see a riot or a disaster. But the giant amphitheatre, so packed with fans that it looked like a can of happy sardines, remained peaceful. By nightfall, however, the sheer press of bodies had turned the arena into a slimy bog, and Wynn, always paranoid in crowds, worried we'd be squashed into mud pies. He found a secluded knoll overlooking the stage, made a nest of blankets and coats and we snuggled down to make love as The Who played 'See Me, Heal Me, Touch Me'. When Jimi Hendrix serenaded a tentative dawn with 'The Star Spangled Banner' I was convinced a wonderful new era was beginning. Here it was, just like the song in *Hair* – the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Goodbye to endless wars, oppression of minorities and survival of the fittest. Hello to a glorious New Age of unlimited possibilities and opportunities, extended families and group living. Everyone would make love to everybody and soon there'd be no black or white or yellow – we'd all be a beautiful brown and live in peace, love and higher consciousness.

We came back to the city bursting with extravagant utopian visions. After a lifetime of painting, Wynn was bored with the solitary studio life, dropped his paintbrushes and turned his formidable energy first toward producing an Off-Broadway play and then to making movies. He produced, directed and shot **BRAND X**, his first film, and, full of camaraderie and utopian ideals, invited some of his colleagues to move in, form a commune in our new loft and help edit the movie.

The new loft had belonged to the painter Alex Katz, who we'd known for quite a while but really made friends with in 1967 after we'd given his six-year-old son Vincent one of our dog Bonkle's off-spring.

Alex told us he'd immediately started painting portraits of the puppy. 'I've never met a Skye terrier before. They're such

characters and that Sony has the most beguiling face,' he'd said, kind brown eyes twinkling. 'I'm really grateful to you for giving me such a wonderful model – buyers are lining up to grab his portrait. Now listen, Ada and I are moving down to Soho . . . need more room for Vincent and Sonny . . . how would you like to take over my studio on Lower Fifth Avenue?'

Good lofts were extremely hard to find and the arrival of children had made Wynn's Bowery aerie with its flights of stairs and lack of neighbourhood facilities difficult. We jumped at Alex's generous offer. The loft – one flight above a restaurant called the Lotus-Eaters on Lower Fifth Avenue – consisted of a big front room used as Wynn's office/studio and, behind it, a spacious living room, separate bedroom, plus a kitchen, bathroom and two sleeping lofts. We hung some of Wynn's bright paintings on the white-washed walls and furnished the living room with a white shag carpet, piles of colourful pillows and a long white sofa. Before long, it was bustling with actors and poets, photographers and hangers-on schmoozing and feeding on Wynn's charisma and my spaghetti.

At first the buzz was stimulating, but all too soon the Woodstock euphoria began to fade. In late '69 came the horrific images of Altamont, followed by escalating casualty lists and excruciating scenes from Vietnam. Anti-draft demonstrations were held across the country, and in Ohio the National Guard fired on unarmed Kent State students, killing four of them.

By mid 1970, the zeitgeist was no longer on TV but on our doorstep. William Burroughs's tarantula was here and running amok as revolutionary rhetoric filled the air and Bob Dylan's *Hard Rain* was falling hard. Friends staggered in from peace rallies with blood streaming down their faces, gasping about being kicked or beaten with police billy clubs, others buzzed that killer heroin was flooding the city and federal agents were arresting people for small amounts of pot. Political activists like Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman were sure the FBI was bugging their phones and setting them up for some kind of bust. They warned Wynn to be careful of what he said on the phone, or we might be put on a list too. A list, I'd shrieked. We're patriotic Americans exercising our right of free speech. Is Nixon

turning our country into a fascist state? Then came the news that Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin had died of drug overdoses. Rumour had it they'd been given adulterated heroin by Nixon's henchmen. Although they'd only been casual friends their deaths infected all of us with dark gloom. Paranoia sizzled through the loft.

NEVER LIVE OVER a restaurant. Not only did the fumes of frying pork and MSG come up from the Lotus-Eaters but we also had a continual battle with giant cockroaches. When rats invaded, we adopted two ferocious cats that kept the rats at bay but gave me asthma.

Seeing me gasping, unable to breathe, friends urged, 'Make an appointment with Dr Feelgood. He's absolutely brilliant and can solve any physical problem. He was Jack and Jackie Kennedy's doctor ... everyone goes to him.'

Dr Feelgood, silver haired and distinguished looking, was a man who inspired confidence. He listened compassionately to my complaints. 'You have a calcium deficiency, my dear,' he said, patting my shoulder. 'What you need is a strong dose of Calcium and Vitamin B-Complex. Take down your pants.' He raised a huge needle filled with pink liquid, plunged it in my butt and laughed as I yelped. 'Don't worry, this special mixture of vitamins will raise your resistance to the cats and you'll have no more problems.'

Zoom! I was filled with marvellous, calm energy, and I didn't need my usual eight hours sleep, could easily cope with the children, and do anything else with extraordinary efficiency. I worshipped Dr Feelgood and his miraculous potion. That is until we went to the country for a long weekend, when I skipped my weekly shot and had a horrible four days – chatting teeth and fever, chills and shaking all over. What was wrong – had I caught some terrible virus?

Three days later, we returned to New York. I was struggling across the cavernous concourse of Grand Central Station, trying not to collapse when a stocky figure in blue jeans hailed us.

'Hi Chamberlains – what's up?' It was Bridget Berlin, my favourite Warhol 'Super Star'. The daughter of the publisher of the Hearst papers and magazines, she never took herself seriously and we often laughed together about our parents

and their pompous hypocritical friends. 'Hey, Sally, you look like a fugitive from *Night of the Living Dead*. What's wrong?'

'I've caught some awful bug. We've been in Rhinebeck for a long weekend and I've been sick the whole time – down on all fours, literally crawling around.'

As I rambled on about skipping my allergy shot, Bridget threw back her streaked blonde mop and hooted, 'What an idiot!' Her eyes danced with delight. 'Dumb dumb, don't you know you're hooked on speed? Dr Feelgood's vitamin shots are pure amphetamines!'

'Amphetamine, amphetamine,' echoed through the cavernous concourse. Commuters stared and I averted my head and scolded myself all the way home. What kind of fool are you, getting hooked on speed when you have two children to take care of? And you can't smoke pot or dabble in psychedelics anymore. It's time to grow up.

HARDER THAN I'd thought. Without the vitamin shots, my energy tanked. We hadn't planned on it but somehow were supporting ten people as well as doing most of the shopping and housework. After a long day in meetings or on the phones trying to get distribution for his film, Wynn would be mopping floors, vacuuming and carrying out trash. I was frazzled from shopping for groceries, cooking communal meals, washing dishes and doing laundry, along with taking care of the children. On sunny days, I'd sit on a bench in Madison Park, watch them play in the sandbox and fret about our family's future. Wynn and I didn't have much of a life together anymore, I thought gloomily – always in a crowd. He struggling to make it in the film world and me trying to give him moral support, as well as give our children the best of childhoods. But was New York a good place to bring up children?

BY OCTOBER of 1970, I felt like a passenger stuck in some grim departure lounge, longing to get out but unsure of what train to get on. One morning, I surveyed the kitchen area with fury – the hamper of dirty clothes, a wet load left in the washing machine and the sink piled with greasy dishes. You'd think some of our loft mates would occasionally wash their own clothes or dishes and not leave all

the work for me. It was finally dawning on me why sensible people avoided communal living. I threw the wet load in the dryer and the dirty clothes in the washing machine, picked up a scrubbing pad and filled the sink with hot water. How could we get rid of the commune and be a nuclear family again?

Bang! The door crashed open and Wynn stumbled in, his face haggard and drained of color.

'Darling, what's wrong?'

'I've just been mugged, a knife at my throat.' There was blood trickling down his yellow turtleneck. 'Can you believe it ... mugged on Fifth Avenue ... in broad daylight.'

'What happened ... you're bleeding ... who did this?'

'I don't know ... a big guy jumped out of nowhere ... from the churchyard, I think ... He was behind me, put a knife with a razor blade at my throat and pulled me back against him. I couldn't move, just stood there, half-strangled and helpless ... thought of you and the kids and didn't fight ... just handed over my wallet and watched him vanish.'

'The children?'

'Don't worry ... they're fine. It happened after I'd left them at the playground down on 12th Street.' He collapsed on the sofa and closed his eyes. I ran for my first aid kit and began dabbing antiseptic on the knife wound.

It was one of those rare occasions when we had the place to ourselves. I brewed strong coffee, laced it with brandy and he drank it quickly, then asked for more. When colour came back to his face he said, 'You do realize the mugging was a sign.'

'What do you mean ... what kind of sign?' My teeth were chattering. What if the mugger's knife had pierced an artery and he'd bled to death on the street? I poured a tot of brandy into my cup and swigged it down.

'Remember that Dylan song – 'take what you have gathered from coincidence.' Coincidence is a sign and the sign is that New York's not safe anymore.' His voice was stronger. 'Think, darling, why are we hanging on here?'

Leave New York! I felt utterly at sea. Unthinkable, or was it? Hold on, my inner voice said, take a deep breath and think again. Perhaps the mugging really is

a sign. Can't you see – Wynn is exhausted from trying to do everything and be there for everyone. He'd been taking Dr Feelgood's shots too, along with various other substances, just to keep going. I sipped more coffee and faced the fact that the relaxed city I'd loved with its closely knit neighbourhoods and lifelong friendships had disappeared and the art scene had become crass and commercial. What was the point of being in New York if we didn't enjoy it anymore?

I thought back to the hopeful protests we'd marched in during the mid-Sixties, our feeling that a new age was dawning and that we could really change things. The Age of Aquarius – how childish to have actually believed in that. How could we have imagined that iconoclastic art and film would shake up society or believe protest marches could make a new and better America? Yes, we'd smashed some antique customs and changed a few social codes, but underneath nothing was that different. Unacceptable racism and thousands of young Americans either dying in Vietnam or fleeing the country for Canada or Europe. The same old men still in charge, sending out messages of anger, fear and violence. Wynn was right – New York was no longer the city we'd loved.

ONE LACKLUSTRE afternoon in November, Allen Ginsberg dropped in and we began reminiscing about Wynn's 1965 show of nudes, especially the sensational portrait of Allen, naked and holding his boyfriend Peter Orlovsky in his arms. The paintings had been exhibited at the Fischbach Gallery on Madison Avenue. Inspired by carefree pictures in nudist magazines, Wynn had portrayed his poet friends – Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Bill Berkson, John Giorno and Diane di Prima – naked and beaming with joy, so realistic they seemed to be walking out of the paintings. At the time, nothing like that had been shown uptown.

As I poured tea for Allen and Wynn, my thoughts jumped back to the opening, standing at the gallery door, welcoming people with owner Marilyn Fischbach. She looked like an aging pixie in her pink Courreges dress and white mini boots but was a courageous soul who'd given Wynn the chance to show his unconventional work. As a large crowd began to push in,

she took a deep breath, patted her blonde beehive and poked out the window at the lurking police (threatening to close the show for obscenity) and the grim-faced guard (waiting to keep out any minors who might be corrupted by the scandalous paintings). She clutched my hand and whispered, 'Do you think we'll be arrested?'

'No, no,' I'd reassured her, 'look over there, the important critics are smiling . . . it's going really well.'

'Maybe you're right,' she said, sounding more hopeful, 'look who just came in – Barney Newman . . . if he comes to your show it means you've done something important.'

Barnett Newman was one of the original great Abstract Expressionists and if he liked Wynn's paintings they'd be a huge success. My spirits soared. Looking back, I visualize that excited young woman in her white Chanel-ish suit and pearls, dark brown hair curled under in a pageboy, standing next to Wynn, tall and lanky in jeans, his boyish face and tousled hair belying an iconoclastic soul. The opening resonated with enthusiasm as magazine editors, newspaper and art critics proclaimed he'd joined the front ranks of the avant-garde. Salvador Dali, suave in pinstripes, sidled through the crowd, twirling the ends of his waved moustache and feeling up young beauties, while his wife Gala's cash register eyes flickered around the gallery, always on the lookout for possible patrons. Larry Rivers, wearing a garish shirt of supreme bad taste, congratulated Wynn with real warmth – 'You've broken new ground, man . . . I'm green with envy.' Alex Katz – always generous with other artists – told Wynn he was way ahead of his time, and Frank O'Hara bounced up and gave him a bear hug. 'What a great show,' he enthused, 'I'm so tired of looking at something that looks like something else. These paintings have given me a jolt . . . feels like a light bulb going off in my head.'

Our cups ran over when Barney Newman, who resembled a Wall Street banker with his steel gray hair, monocle, tailored suit, white shirt and tie, shook Wynn's hand with respect. When Larry, Alex and Frank said Wynn had created something of real interest, he nodded and said, 'I totally agree.' Clarice Rivers, wrapped in a white fluffy coat, blonde hair hang-

ing to the waist, wisecracked and joked about who would be the next one to take off their clothes and model for Wynn. 'You're next, Sally, you're next,' she cackled, sending a frisson of fright up my spine.

ALAS, THE triumphant night was just another lost dream. Five years later, in November 1970, my pearls were in the pawn shop to pay our phone bill and I wasn't wearing designer knock-offs anymore; nobody was congratulating us and Wynn was no longer full of exhilaration and hope. His eyes were sad as he told Allen Ginsberg about being mugged a few weeks earlier.

Despite the freezing weather, Allen was dressed in cotton kurta-pyjamas and sandals and glowed with warmth and joy. But his smile faded as he listened to Wynn. 'Man, that's heavy . . . you're lucky not to have been seriously hurt.'

'I hate to admit it but I was seriously scared,' Wynn said.

'Me too,' I added, 'I've lived in New York all my life but now I'm frightened. We want to split, but where can we go . . . we don't want to vegetate on a beach . . . have to find a new direction . . . something life changing . . . something to believe in.'

Allen's face cleared. 'Ah, then India's the place for you . . . you must go . . . I've been there several times and am going back next month.'

Wynn looked at him doubtfully. 'Is it all right to take the children . . . won't they get sick?'

'Of course not . . . and if you take sensible precautions you'll stay healthy.' His beatific grin flashed white out of his flamboyant black beard. 'Go . . . India is the Mother of the World, the fountainhead of all culture. The people are gentle and kind and love children. You'll be captivated by everything . . . your head will be turned around.' With missionary fervour he stated, 'Go! India is a safe and good place to take your children. I promise you'll never regret it.'

THE VERY NEXT morning the letter came. 'Time to get out of America,' wrote Robert Fraser. Charming Robert had been a close friend ever since he'd come to New York in the late Fifties to work at Knoedler's. When he went home to London

he opened his own trendsetting gallery, which became the beacon of new art in England. But after a run-in with the police in 1969, he abruptly abandoned his louche life with the Rolling Stones and Beatles and disappeared.

'I'm in India,' he wrote, 'and you should escape too while you can. Nothing interesting is going to happen in America while Nixon is President. I've traveled all over India and am learning so much. Why don't you come – India's an amazing country and a wonderful place for children. Come!'

Ever since the days of Alexander the Great, westerners had been going to the

fabled subcontinent and having inconceivable experiences. Here was the chance to change our lives, take our children far from danger and find something to believe in – something to sustain us in the rough seas ahead. I fantasized climbing snowcapped precipices and finding a hidden cave where a charismatic yogi would teach me . . . I didn't know what, but knew it would be important.

Allen's encouragement and Robert's letter gave us the needed push. Wanting to start with a clean slate, we invited friends and acquaintances to help themselves to our possessions. For three days, there was a non-stop party at the loft, with crowds

rummaging through piles of clothes, records and books. Hangovers from my long-gone Upper East Side life – designer suits and spectator pumps, cashmere sweaters and glittering rhinestone earrings – were snapped up. Adios to the old me, I thought happily as I watched young poet Rene Ricard, wrapped in my floor-length fur coat, and transsexual Candy Darling, an eerie clone of Marilyn Monroe in my most elaborate chiffon evening gown, waltz out together. I was free at last and ready for whatever Fate had in store. If I hadn't been such a day dreamer, I would have stopped for a moment and considered what that might entail. ♦

MEMOIR – SOMEWHERE NEAR THE END

'I quite like boring memoirs'

Diana Athill on the perils and pleasures of the genre

It took Diana Athill a good few minutes to make it down the stairs after I rang the bell, but she opened up the door and greeted me with enough spark and vitality to excuse the wait. She is ninety-two. The title of her latest book is Somewhere Towards the End, and judging by her appearance, that somewhere is a lively place. The house she lives in is perched on the edge of Regent's Park in London and has three flights of stairs – forty-two steps altogether – that lead to her top-floor flat. Greek books fill the bookshelves on one landing. 'So people think I'm learning Greek,' she said as we passed. 'I'm not.' There is an automatic chair that can coast along up the staircase, but Athill walked slowly, with purpose, talking her time. Beside her, two small white dogs skittered about. 'This is the one I like best,' she said when we arrived at the flat. 'He's called Max and he doesn't usually ask for anything unless he wants it. Alfie is dishonest.' Alfie glanced up, considered the charge, then scampered away.

Because of distortion in her hearing aids, Athill no longer listens to music. She has no television, but the room is covered in stacks of books. Lately she's been rereading Vera Brittain's memoir, and I also notice some David Foster Wallace. Her first memoir, Stet, should be compulsory reading for anyone with a hard, underpaid job in a profession they love and cannot extricate themselves from. It conjures up a world when publishing houses were found in

actual houses, and it allowed Athill to stroll through remembrances of the financial turmoils, hard-won successes and relationships she forged with the damaged, powerful, clueless, naive and sometimes boringly pleasant writers whose manuscripts passed beneath her pen.

Athill has a girlish laugh and an accent that turns words like sensual into 'sen-suell'. In Somewhere Towards the End, which was written when she was eighty-eight, Athill said that older women should wear enough but never too much make-up, and true to her word she wore foundation but did not stray into lipstick. She looked far livelier than most sixty-somethings. At one point she leaned towards me and asked in her perky, inquisitive voice, 'How old are you?'

'Thirty-three,' I answered.

'Nice age. Very nice age. You don't have to worry about getting old for a long time. At the same time you're well clear of being too young. You get a bit of perspective. Things that go wrong don't matter quite so much.'

At the end of the interview Athill announced she had to go shopping in her car. 'The car does continue,' she said, perhaps in response to my look of surprise. 'It's pretty battered, but it does go on. My driving licence reached its end not so long ago and I thought, "Oh God, when I apply for my new licence I'm sure they'll say I have to take a test." Not a bit of it. They sent me a new one without a moment's hesitation. I've got a new licence until 2012.' She laughed

– again that high, happy laugh. 'And that, I should think, will probably see my driving days through. Though you never know.' —CT

Why do some memoirs work better than others?

It depends on what you're asking from a memoir. I never used to distinguish between the autobiography and the memoir. Apparently they're now considered two different classes of writing. The autobiography is the official and the memoir is the private, and the reason why some private ones work better depends on the degree to which they make you feel they are telling you the truth about a life.

Is truth important in a memoir?

To me it is everything. It is the whole point of writing the thing. You're trying to get to the bottom of your experience. As you get older, memoir is also for pleasure, the pleasure of remembering, but to me writing memoir began as a sort of therapeutic impulse – sorting out your life – and what is the point of sorting unless you try to sort with honesty?

There are two people I published who both said the same thing in different words. Jean Rhys, the novelist, who wrote very autobiographical novels, used to say the one thing she tried to do was get it like it really was. Vidia Naipaul was writing originally about a society and people very unlike the British. He wondered how they were going to be persuaded to understand what he was writing about. I've come to

the conclusion, he said, that if you get it right people will understand however different it may be. The memoir that gets it like it really was is interesting because you are getting a true view of somebody's life, or at least as true as possible.

The facts can be interesting too from a historical point of view but they can be very boring. Of course political autobiography tends to be terribly boastful. 'Look how splendid I was. Look at the wonderful job I did.' Political autobiographies are death.

I read Bill Clinton's.

Awful. The only politician I know who's written a really good one is Barack

Obama because it was written before he was campaigning. He's a wonderful writer – very honest about himself and his own failures. Over and over all that work he did in Chicago was in vain. He struggled on, he got through, but half the time it was a flop and he said so.

Do you think it's good to be honest about subjects that might not get discussed?

In my own case that would be sex. It's important to be honest about sex. A lot of lives in the past were ruined because people were not honest. So yes, it's important to talk about but I think it's pretty good nonsense when they say that my books have gone further when it

comes to talking about sex.

Memoirs of a previous generation might not have been able to talk about it in the same candid way.

But if they were good memoirs they somehow implied what had gone on and whether it had been happy or dreadful. They would be honest up to a point. It's not a memoir but I'll use *Middlemarch* as an example. George Eliot would have never mentioned sexual relationships but you know perfectly well it was pretty grim when Dorothea married that old man. You feel it. You know that George Eliot knew.

What sorts of memoir do you most enjoy?

I like quite boring memoirs. That is, if I feel that they're telling me what that life was really like. I read one or two lives written by unsophisticated writers – people who don't write very well. In the end we didn't publish them because they were too unpolished but they stay in my mind because they were extraordinary stories of what had happened to people.

How do you improve a submitted memoir?

As an editor I don't remember ever taking on a personal memoir unless I had been prepared to publish it as it was. There might have been small, small points – carelessness in the writing or whatever – but I don't remember ever taking on a rough and ready one. Then there are the celebs. That's a class of its own that I never had anything to do with, thank God.

I was once asked to help a little pop singer write her memoir. It was absolutely ridiculous. The child was only about twenty. She had nothing to say at all. What could she say? She was a good little singer but it was just daft. We ended up just having a giggly cup of coffee together and left it at that. When a memoir is simply a matter of public relations I don't bother to read it.

Do you find it hard to write about other people?

My first book, *Instead of a Letter*, was the nearest to being a therapeutic experience for me. I had to start using a different tone of voice when I wrote about



other people. You're free to try and be as honest as you possibly can about yourself but you can't do it with other people. In the end you've got to consider their feelings and so you start talking in a different tone of voice. I decided to leave the friends out because it just didn't work.

How would you describe that tone of voice?

A style I suppose. You start being a little more artificial when you think of ways of telling about people who you're fond of that describe what they were really like but not in a way that would hurt their feelings.

Did you worry about feelings of others?

If I did I just left them out. Or wrote about them when they were dead.

Has our attitude as a society changed towards memoir?

People go on about honesty. Weidenfeld has just reissued a very famous old memoir called *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain. They asked me to read it and reassess it because I knew it when I was young. Brittain was very honest about the First World War. She had lost her brother and the man she was in love with and all their best friends. It was dreadful. She needed to get through it all, sort it out and begin again. But she elaborates too much for the modern mind. Some of it is quite tiresome. She goes on too much and describes too much. People have learned to think about their lives more concisely. You cut as if you were making a film.

What do you hope people will learn from your books?

I didn't think anyone will learn anything. I was writing them for my own interest. You read memoir to get into another life. If they were written in order to provide lessons they might become rather dictatorial, and rather boring. They're just there.

I've been told constantly that my last book is inspirational. This actually baffles me because I don't know what readers are inspired to do. Get old? It wasn't written to inspire anyone to do anything.

It was just written to say this is what it's been like for me.

I even thought a lot of old people might resent this book because I'd been so lucky. I've had such a lucky old age. Nice things have happened to me and I've discovered I could write. If you are an old person having a horrid, dreadful, miserable old age, which an awful lot of them are, I should loathe this. I should be jolly cross with me.

It would be hard for publishers to sell a memoir by an old person who just complained how awful life was.

It would be dreadful. In my days it was very, very hard to get anything published about old age. Booksellers took it for granted it was going to be depressing. Old age has improved. Within my lifetime people have become more positive about it. They haven't accepted it as an inevitably gloomy fate like they used to. More people have realized you can go on having a nice time.

Is absolute clarity possible when we write about our own lives?

Absolute clarity, absolute honesty, one cannot swear to. Minds deceive each other. You can't quite remember. Was that something that happened or was I told it happened? All you can do is try your best. You think you have it right and then, to your horror, you discover someone else remembers the same thing in a completely different way and they're equally sure they're remembering it right. Nothing is worse, really, than hearing accounts of some awful thing that's happened – a split up marriage or something. And you hear two perfectly convincing accounts of the same thing. They're absolutely different. Very disconcerting.

One's mind does get blunted with age. One's instincts get blunted. The way one thinks things tasted much better when one was a child was simply because you were completely tasting them and now your sense of taste is not as good as it was.

Lives are long and capacious these days. People are able to lead more than one kind of life and with memoir it's quite nice to occasionally get into other people's shoes and say ah, that's how it

would be like. That's the point of memoirs, I think. There are also old diaries. They give you interesting detail about life. I love them.

Do you have any old diaries of your own?

I haven't got any old diaries. I don't keep them.

Do you think a biography of yourself would be wildly different from your last memoir?

I don't see the point of why any one should write a biography about anybody who has written as much autobiographical material as myself. It's all there. Someone will though. There are always hundreds of people who can't think of what to write about. They're usually earnest ladies in America doing theses. But it will be pointless and I'm going to leave them absolutely nothing to work with except in my written work. I throw things away anyway. I live in a very small place. I simply haven't got room.

This is very sad in a way because the people who buy archives have been approaching me – an American on one hand and the British Library on the other. They say 'We'd love to buy your archive.' And they pay! They pay for old envelopes. I've got nothing. I've thrown it all away. I just can't be bothered. I don't even keep my fan mail.

That sounds quite tactical.

It wasn't a matter of policy. I just started throwing things away.

Does the possibility of a biography excite you in any way?

No. I don't particularly want to be written about. If I was a novelist that would be different. There could be literary criticism about my novel and that would be fine. But I'm not a novelist. In what I have written I have tried to get my life as it really was. I haven't projected a picture of myself being different from how I am. I hope I have succeeded. A biography? No. I only just started this arc of being fairly well known. Mostly I wasn't. Most of my life I was a rather inconspicuous publishing lady. ◇

Adults

Paul Farley

I'd look up to them looming on street corners,
or down on them at night through my bedroom blinds,
crashing home from the Labour Club, mad drunk.
After a while I decided they must be unhappy.

And this didn't tally at all with my view of their world.
Adults could float through days sole sovereigns
of everything around them, could pass through walls
of childish silence, or just take off in the *Sunbeam*.

So why did I find them at hometime slumped in their chairs
or throwing their tea up the wall? Why did they cry
on their own downstairs with the whole house listening in
or plead softly to people who weren't even there?

You think you know all the answers at that age.
You can't wait to grow up and sort them out, then go
to live in Mayfair or Singapore, wear a smoking jacket
and drink gin slings all day, like real writers do.

Ian Fleming and Raymond Chandler

'You want me to describe how it's done?'

In this unique interview recorded in 1958, the creators of two of the most durable heroes of the thriller genre sat down to discuss their work over a few drinks. They speak about the challenge of creating a believable villain, the challenge of dispassionately killing a man, and the reason Fleming feels obliged to have his creation, James Bond, tortured at least once each novel. Their distinct personalities and approaches are revealed almost instantly. Fleming is the eager student and Chandler, who sipped something cold from his glass throughout the talk, comes across as the cool operator, knowledgeable in the darker arts. Fleming is a good journalist. He takes notes whenever he travels to an exotic locale so that each Bond assignment is coloured with shades of authenticity. But as he points out later in the interview, Chandler has a more direct way of doing his own research. He knows, he says, how it feels to be banged on the head with the butt of a revolver.

IF: Well, the first thing, really, is to define what we're supposed to be talking about. I think the title of what we're supposed to be talking about is English and American thrillers. What is a thriller? To my mind of course, you don't write thrillers and I do.

RC: I do too.

IF: I don't call yours thrillers. Yours are novels.

RC: A lot of people call them thrillers.

IF: I know. I think it's wrong.

RC: Oh, well I...

IF: I mean, you write novels of suspense like Simenon does and like Eric Ambler does perhaps, but in which violence is the background, just as love might be in the background of the ordinary or the straight kind of novel...

RC: Well, in America, a thriller, or a mystery story as we call them, is slightly below the salt.

IF: Yes, thriller writing is very below the salt really...

RC: You can write a long, very lousy historical novel full of sex and it can be a bestseller and be treated respectfully. But a very good thriller writer, who writes far, far better, just gets a little paragraph of course.

IF: Yes, I know. That's very true.

RC: Mostly. There's no attempt to judge him as a writer.

IF: But you yourself are judged as a writer, and Dashiell Hammett was, I think...

RC: Well, yes, but how long did it take me? You starve to death for ten years before your publisher knows you're any good [laughs].

IF: Well, yes, of course. Your first story is now a very valuable first edition. Where do you get your material? It's nearly always a Californian setting, isn't it? Has it ever not been a Californian setting?

RC: Well, I lived many years in Los Angeles, and Los Angeles had never been written about. California had been written about, a book called *Ramona*... a lot of sentimental slop. But nobody in my time had tried to write about a Los Angeles background in any sort of realistic way. Of course now, half the writers in America live in California [laughs].

IF: Well, Nathanael West did, I mean... didn't he?

RC: Yes, but he came along much, much later.

IF: Yes, that's quite true. As far as my material is concerned I'm afraid I just get mine by going to places and taking down copious notes because I can't remember anything.

RC: Yes, but you're an experienced journalist.

IF: I think that's probably the answer. I mean, I learnt by writing...

RC: You can go to Las Vegas and you can get Las Vegas in a few days... except the iced water.

IF: [laughs] Oh yes, you complained about one of the meals James Bond ordered in Las Vegas. I described the meal and I didn't get the waitress bringing in the iced water as the first thing...

RC: That amused me because the first thing you usually get in American restaurants is a glass of iced water, put down by the waitress or the busboy.

IF: Yes, but I rather pride myself on trying to get these details right.

RC: I don't think any English writer has ever got as many right as you have. I mean, that stuff in Harlem was wonderful.

IF: Was it?

RC: I thought it was, and also in St Petersburg.

IF: I rather liked St Petersburg...

RC: I don't think any American writer could have done it more accurately.

IF: I don't know if you do, but I find it extremely difficult to write about villains. Villains are extremely difficult people to put my finger on. You can often find heroes wandering around life. You meet them and come across them as well as plenty of heroines of course. But a really good solid villain is a very difficult person to build up, I think.

RC: In my own mind I don't think I ever think anyone is a villain.

IF: No, that comes out in the book. But you've had some quite tough, villainous people there.

RC: Yes, they... yes.

IF: I see they had another killing last week in New York. One of these men connected with that dock union man – what’s his name?

RC: Albert Anastasia?

IF: Anastasia, yes. How’s a killing like that arranged?

RC: Very simply. [pause] You want me to describe how it’s done?

IF: Yes, yes.

RC: Well, first of all the syndicate has to decide if he must be killed, and they don’t want to kill people.

IF: No.

RC: It’s bad business nowadays.

IF: Yes.

RC: When they make the decision they telephone to a couple of chaps in, say, Minneapolis, in a hardware store or something – a respectful business front. These chaps come along to New York and they’re given their instructions and they’re given a photograph of the man and told what’s known about him. They’re given guns . . .

IF: In Minneapolis?

RC: No, not in Minneapolis. After they get their instructions they’re given guns. Now, these guns are not defaced in any way, but they are guns that have passed through so many hands that the present owners can never be traced. The company could only say the first purchaser. So, they go to where the man lives, and they get an apartment or a room across the street from him. They study him for days and days and days until they know just exactly when he goes out, and when he comes home, what he does. And when they’re ready, they simply walk up to him and shoot him. They have to have a crash car – Bugsy Siegel was a great man for the crash car. The crash car is in case a police car should come down the street, and it accidentally on purpose smashes the police car . . .

IF: Yes, I see what you mean.

RC: . . . so they get away. They get back on the plane and go home, and that’s all there is to it.

IF: They drop the guns at the spot, do they?

RC: They always drop the guns, yes.

IF: And wear gloves?

RC: Well, how many fingerprints have ever been taken off guns?

IF: Yes, quite.

RC: You gotta hold ’em by the butt . . .

IF: Yes, that’s quite true. Of course [fingerprints] always appear to be taken off in books, but I suspect that because by filing the material on the butt and scraping it well you make a rough surface that won’t take any prints at all.

RC: No, and butts aren’t made that way. They’re made to be rough . . .

IF: Yes, quite true. So, how much do these men get paid?

RC: Ten thousand.

IF: Ten thousand each?

RC: Yes, if it’s an important man. That’s small money to a syndicate.

IF: Yes. And then they go back to their jobs in hardware stores in Minneapolis?

RC: It’s quite impersonal. They don’t care about the man, don’t care if he’s dead or alive. It’s just a job to them. Of course they have to be a certain sort of person, or they wouldn’t do it. They’re not like us. We wouldn’t do it.

IF: No . . . difficult thing to imagine doing.

RC: Well, I’ve known people I’d like to shoot.

IF: Anybody in England?

RC: No, not in England.

IF: What do you want to shoot them for?

RC: I guess I thought they were better dead.

IF: Again to go back to villains. Of course, the difficulty is to set in oneself – and to be able to persuade the reader – that the man is not to be pitied for being a sick man. It’s difficult to depict somebody who really is tough without being a psychopath.

RC: Well, it’s almost impossible to imagine an absolutely bad man who is not a psychopath.

IF: True. And then you create pity for him at once. It’s difficult . . . and that’s what I mean about villains. They’re very difficult people to build up.

RC: Well, he’ll have this very human side. He may be very kind to his family, but in his business – illegitimate – he may be quite ruthless.

IF: Well, you’ve got to know these people, you can’t invent them.

RC: [pause] You don’t find anyone really that’s all bad.

IF: Your hero, Philip Marlowe, is a real hero. He behaves in a heroic fashion. I never intended my leading character, James Bond, to be a hero. I intended him to be a sort of blunt instrument wielded by a government department who would get into bizarre and fantastic situations and more or less shoot his way out of them, or get out of them one way or another. But of course he’s always referred to as my hero. I don’t see him as a hero myself. On the whole I think he’s a rather unattractive man . . .

RC: You ought to . . .

IF: . . . ought to, I know. I’d certainly write about him with more feeling and more kindness probably.

RC: I think you did in *Casino Royale*.

IF: Do you?

RC: Yes.

IF: Well, I . . . yes, he had some emotions at the end, when the girl died.

RC: That's all right, but a man in his job can't afford tender emotions.

IF: Well, that's what I feel.

RC: He feels them but he has to quell them.

IF: Yes. On the other hand Philip Marlowe feels them and speaks about them.

RC: He's always confused.

IF: He is, is he? [laughs]

RC: [laughs] He's like me.

IF: I've managed to get an advance copy of your last book, the one that's just coming out in paperback, and I'm very interested by this passage talking about violence and toughness and so on and so forth. It seems to me very well put. He's gone into this girl's bedroom having overheard her conversation as a black-mailer.

[Fleming begins to read from book] 'She brought out a small automatic up from her side. I looked at it. "Oh guns", I said, "Don't scare me with guns. I've lived with 'em all my life, I've used an old Derringer, single shots, the kind the riverboat gamblers used to carry. As I got older I graduated to a lightweight sporting rifle then a 303 target rifle and so on. I once made a bull at 900 yards at open sight. In case you don't know, the whole target looks the size of a postage stamp at 900 yards." "A fascinating career," she said. "Guns never settle anything," I said. "They're just a fast curtain to a bad second act."'

[chuckles] I think that's well put. But you see that is a far more sensible point of view than the one which I put forward in my books, where people are shooting each other so much and so often that you often need a programme to tell who is in the act and who is a spectator.

RC: Why do you always have to have a torture scene?

IF: Well . . . do I always? Yes, let me think now . . . maybe you're right.

RC: Well, every one that I've read.

IF: Really? I suppose I was brought up on *Dr Fu Manchu* and thrillers of that kind and somehow always, even in *Bulldog Drummond* and so on, the hero at the end gets in the grips of the villain and he suffers, either he's drugged or something happens to him . . .

RC: Well, next time, try brainwashing. Probably worse than torture.

IF: I think it is, yes. I don't like to get too serious. This so-called hero of mine has a good time. He beats the villain in the end and gets the girl and he serves his government well. But in the process of that he's got to suffer something in return for this success. I mean, what do you do, dock him something on his income tax? I really tire of the fact that the hero in other people's thrillers gets a bang on the head with a revolver butt and he's perfectly happy afterwards – just a bump on his head.

RC: That's one of my faults – they recover too quickly. I know what it is to be banged on the head with a revolver butt. The first thing you do is vomit.

IF: It is, is it?

RC: Mm-hmm.

IF: Yes. Well, there you are. You see, that's already getting violent and unattractive and so on. The truth is like that, you see. While there's certainly criticism of my books that it comes in too often, I think my so-called hero has to suffer before he gets his prize at the end . . .

RC: Well, he's got to suffer a little, that's true, but . . .

IF: Not too much, eh? Well, he doesn't get hurt in the next book which I've just written. Much.

RC: Have you?

IF: Yes.

RC: What's it called?

IF: It's called *Goldfinger*.

RC: Which?

IF: *Goldfinger*.

RC: How can you write so many books with all the other things you do?

IF: I have two months off in Jamaica every year. That's in my contract with the *Sunday Times*, and I sit down and I write a book every year during those two months, and then I bring it back.

RC: I can't write a book in two months.

IF: But then you write better books than I do.

RC: That may be or may be not, but I still can't write a book in two months. The fastest book I ever wrote, I wrote in three months.

IF: Simenon writes them in about a week or ten days.

RC: Mm-hmm. And so could Erle Stanley Gardner.

IF: Yes.

RC: In fact, Edgar Wallace . . . I know a story about Edgar Wallace going to Hollywood, and they asked him if he would write an original story for a screenplay. They expected him to take about six weeks. This was on a Friday and he was back on Monday with it finished.

IF: I hope they paid him for the whole six weeks.

RC: I think it was a flat sum.

IF: I'm glad to hear it. But your man, your hero Philip Marlowe – is he based more or less on yourself, so to speak? I see a certain . . . in fact, I see a *distinct* relationship between you and Philip Marlowe.

RC: Oh, not deliberately. If so, it does happen.

IF: I suppose my chap has got some foibles that I've got, but I wouldn't have

said he had any relation to the person I think I am, but there it is.

RC: Can you play baccarat as well as he can?

IF: Not as well, no. I'd like to be able to – I love it. I love gambling.

RC: I don't enjoy gambling at all. It's the only vice I don't possess.

IF: Oh, come, come. There are plenty left, aren't there?

RC: Well, it is the only vice I don't possess. I have no interest in gambling.

IF: Would you say there are any basic differences between the English and the American thriller?

RC: Oh yes. An American thriller is much faster paced.

IF: We've got into a rather 'tea and muffins' school of writing here, I think. Policemen are much too nice and always drinking cups of tea, and inspectors puff away at pipes and the whole thing goes on in a rather sort of quiet atmosphere in some little village somewhere in England. Of course, you've got the private-eye tradition which we haven't got so much over here because our private detectives are on the whole just ordinary people who go and follow married couples around and try to catch them out.

RC: Same as they are in America . . .

IF: Yes, but they're written up to be much more.

RC: A private eye is a catalyst, a man who resolves the situation. He doesn't exist in real life. Unless you can make him seem real. He doesn't make any money either.

IF: Marlowe seems real to me – I mean I visualize him quite clearly.

RC: But that's because I've known him so long. He's not real as a specimen, as a private detective.

IF: I suppose the same thing applies to

secret service agents. I've known quite a number of them, and on the whole they're very quiet, peace-loving people whom you might meet in the street, sit next to them in your club, in fact two or three do sit next to me in my club . . .

RC: They must have an immense interior courage though.

IF: They must, because it a dull job and they get no thanks for it and they get no medals. Pretty dull on the wives too, they have a hard time, apart from the danger and all the rest of it. Are you planning any kind of new book now?

RC: I've got myself in a bad spot now.

IF: In what way?

RC: The fellow has to get married.

IF: He is? Marlowe's going to get married, is he?

RC: Yes, but there's going to be an awful struggle. So, she's not going to like him sticking to his rather seedy profession as she thinks of it, and he is not at all going to like the way she wants to live, in an expensive house in Palm Springs with a lot of freeloaders coming in all the time. So, it's going to be a struggle, it might end in divorce, I don't know . . .

IF: Oh golly. You wouldn't like to go and kill her off perhaps?

RC: Kill her?

IF: Yes?

RC: Oh no, she's too nice.

IF: She is, is she? Linda, isn't it?

RC: Yes, much too nice to kill off.

IF: Ah. Oh well. Well, I don't think my fellow is going to get married.

RC: Of course if I had Marlowe killed off it would solve a lot of problems. I wouldn't have to write any more books about him.

IF: I wonder what the basic ingredients

of a good thriller really are. Of course, you should have pace; it should start on the first page and carry you right through. And I think you've got to have violence, I think you've got to have a certain amount of sex, you've got to have a basic plot, people have got to want to know what's going to happen by the end of it.

RC: Yes, I agree. There has to be an element of mystery, in fact there has to be a mysterious situation. The detective doesn't know what it's all about, he knows that there's something strange about it, but he doesn't know just what it's all about. It seems to me that the real mystery is not who killed Sir John in his study, but what the situation really was, what the people were after, what sort of people they were.

IF: That's exactly what you write about, of course – you develop your characters very much more than I do, and the thriller element it seems to me in your books is in the people, the character building, and to a considerable extent in the dialogue, which of course I think is some of the finest dialogue written in any prose today. I think basically we're both of us to a certain extent humorous too, which possibly might not come out at first sight, but we like making funny jokes.

RC: 'So and so' is really rather a bore.

IF: Yes. Have you got any particularly favourite thriller writers, Ray? People you automatically buy more or less blind?

RC: No. I don't have to buy them. They send them to me free.

IF: They do?

RC: The publishers do.

IF: You're lucky. There aren't enough good thrillers. For me, I like reading them in aeroplanes and trains. I find they're wonderful kinds of books to pass the time with.

Well, anyway, thanks, Ray. It's been lovely to see you again.

RC: Well, I love to see you always. ◇

The Agony Uncle

Alain de Botton will help you see the way

I am 35 and living in Windermere. Last year, a good friend of mine died in a skiing accident. He and I belonged to a group of friends who had all gone to university together – and his death struck us all very hard. But strangely, since his death, some wonderful things have happened. One woman who always wanted to leave her job to write a novel has gone and done so and (I've just heard) will be published next year. Another friend has ended a bad relationship and is now with a much more loving person. And I've started the business I always wanted to start (an architecture firm) and am so happy to have done this. In a strange way, it's as though our friend's death has taught us how to live and not care so much what the world will say if we do what we want. What do you think of this? —Max, Windermere

YOUR LETTER made me think of the wonderful novella by Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* – about a high court judge in St Petersburg who thinks only about his image and is superficial in the extreme, but who at the age of forty-five develops an incurable disease and suddenly rethinks his life. With only a few weeks to live, he recognizes that he has wasted his time on earth, that he has led an outwardly respectable, but inwardly barren existence. He scrolls back through his upbringing, education and career and finds that everything he did was motivated by the desire to appear important in the eyes of others. It is too late for him – but the message of the novella is that it may not be too late for the readers.

But how might the thought of death, and terminal illness, serve to orient us away from an excessive concern with doing what other people want from us?

In part, death may make it easier for us to discern the conditional, fickle and hence perhaps worthless nature of the love offered to us by many people on the basis of our social position. When we are in good health and at the height of our powers, we do not have to consider too deeply whether we are loved for ourselves or the advantages we can offer. The high court judge loved by aristocrats and newspaper editors will seldom have the courage or cynicism to wonder, 'Is it *me* they love, or is it simply

my position in society?' For a time, 'me' and 'my position in society' are melded together with an invisible seam – and so the smiles and invitations become indistinguishable from signs of true affection. With death looming, on the other hand, we are liable to turn in rage against our status-conditional lovers, as angry with ourselves for being vain enough to be seduced by them as with them for orchestrating their heartless seductions. The thought of death brings authenticity to social life. There is no better way to clear the diary of engagements than to wonder who among our acquaintances would make the trip to the hospital bed.

As conditional love starts to seem less interesting, so too may many of the things that we pursue in order to secure it: wealth, esteem, power. If these elements buy us the kind of love which will only last so long as our status holds, and yet, if we are destined to fragment into dust particles, then we have an unusually clear reason to concentrate our energies on those relationships that will best survive our disintegration.

Herodotus reports that it was the custom towards the end of Egyptian feasts, when revellers were at their most exuberant, for servants to enter banqueting halls and pass between the tables carrying skeletons on stretchers. Regrettably, Herodotus does not go on to explain what effect the thought of death was intended to have on the revellers. Would it make them keener to carry on merry-making or send them home in a new-found spirit of seriousness?

Even if reactions to deathly thoughts show great variations, their general effect may be to push us to focus on whatever happens to matter most to us; be this drinking on the banks of the Nile or making art or loving our children. Death urges us to shake off habit, laziness or timidity and to concentrate on our truest commitments. Even if the thought of death can sometimes be abused (to coerce people into doing what they have no wish to do), more hopefully, it may correct our tendency to live as if we could afford perpetually to defer our deepest wishes. Before a skeleton, the more repressive aspects of

others' opinions swiftly lose their power to intimidate us. The thought of death can lend us the courage to unhook ourselves from gratuitous societal expectations.

Herodotus also tells us that Xerxes, mighty King of Persia, upon successfully invading Greece with an army of nearly two million men in 480 bc, at first congratulated himself upon his good fortune and abilities as he saw the whole Hellespont filled with the vessels of his fleet and every plain covered with his regiments. But a few moments later, he began to weep, and his stunned uncle Artabanus, standing beside him, asked what a man in Xerxes' position could have to cry about. Xerxes replied that he had just realized that in a hundred years' time all those before them, every one of his glorious soldiers and sailors with whose help he had terrified the known world, would be dead. One might be no less sad, and no less sceptical as to the value of certain achievements and ideas of what is meaningful when looking at, for example, a picture of the participants at a sales conference for Heinz salesmen in 1902 (I recently saw one). We might think of the excited plans to raise the volume of ketchup and pickles in stores across the United States – and weep with the bitterness of King Xerxes of Persia. Of course, the erasure of our efforts at the hands of death is apparent in other tasks besides those of conquering nations and building brands; we might look at a mother teaching her young, golden-haired child to read a book and shed as many tears at the thought that these two endearing people will also be dead within a hundred years. Nevertheless, we may still feel that bringing up a child survives the thought of death better than selling condiments; that helping a friend has an edge over leading an army.

'Vanity of Vanity, all is vanity,' lamented the author of Ecclesiastes (1:2), 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever.' And yet, it seems that not all things can be equally vain. Maybe leaving a bad relationship is less vain than staying in an old one because your parents might be upset. Hopefully, the point of reflecting on death is not to leave us depressed by the vanity of everything. Rather it is to embolden us to find fault with specific aspects of our lives, while at the same time granting us licence to attend more seriously to our own interests. ◇

Love Thy Neighbour

By Tom Hodgkinson

TODAY, BROTHERS and sisters, I am going to talk about love and neighbourliness. But first, let me say a few words about the opposite of love and neighbourliness, and that is usury. Here is Ezra Pound on the subject, contrasting our age of shoddy and mass production with the pre-Reformation era of pride in creation:

With usura hath no man a house of
good stone
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that delight might cover their face,
with usura

hath no man a painted paradise on his
church wall
harpes et luthes
or where virgin receiveth message
and halo projects from incision . . .

What is usury? It is a charge made for the use of money. It is more or less lending of money at interest. It is the basis of modern capitalism, and the fascinating thing is that medieval economic systems were dead set against it.

Why? Because usury was exploitative and therefore threatened to wreck communities. The medieval man and woman were community-minded to an extent that is difficult to imagine in our individualistic times. The ‘common good’ was a frequently repeated phrase in medieval legal documents. And the city states of Italy referred to themselves as ‘*il commune*’. The commune.

Medieval ethics came largely from the Bible, where there are repeated injunctions against usury. Exodus 22:24 says:

If you lend money to one of your poor neighbours among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner to him by demanding interest from him.

Leviticus 25:35–7 says that Christians should display fraternity with the poor, and not exploit them:

When one of your fellow countrymen is reduced to poverty and is unable to hold out beside you, extend to him the privileges of an alien or a tenant, so that he may continue to live with you. Do not exact interest from your countrymen either in money or in kind, but out of fear of God let him live with you.

Now usury did take place: the new burghers of the free cities, buzzing with work and trade, needed credit. And commercial credit was OK. But the various councils – Lateran, Lyon, Vienna – strenuously objected to it when it was directed downwards, towards the poor.

Today we have those terrible ads on daytime TV for loan consolidation companies, who prey on the weak and lonely by peddling loans and charging giant interest. This sort of behaviour would have been completely unacceptable to the medieval culture. Usury was a sin, it was a form of greed, or *avaritia*. And, said Thomas Aquinas, it is manifestly unfair:

Making a charge for lending money is unjust in itself, for one party sells the other something non-existent, and this obviously sets up an inequality which is contrary to justice.

The medievals would also quote the proverb *Fenus pecuniae, funus est animae*, meaning ‘usurious profit from money is the death of the soul’.

The situation could not be much clearer. Usury was a sin. It made time into money. Time was not money, time was a gift from God, and as such could not be bought or sold. Usury means the commodification of time. It is radically unneighbourly and radically loveless.

Today, usury has grown to a sort of religion. Thanks to Luther and Calvin, the old medieval condemnation of usury was removed, and a new approach to things took over. Freedom of worship turned into freedom to extort, and it is the sort of freedom that the USA has car-

ried to an extreme in its embrace of free-market philosophy. The sub-prime lending is an example of greed-based usury in action, and look at the consequences.

The scene was set for these developments when Henry VIII destroyed the monasteries. At the same time, he also destroyed the old culture which had precisely guarded against capitalism. I don’t say trade, I say capitalism, i.e. usury. The great radical and agitator William Cobbett, writing in the early nineteenth century, as a Protestant, condemned the Reformation in the following terms:

Now my friends, a fair and honest enquiry will teach us that this was an alteration greatly for the worse; that the ‘Reformation’, as it is called, was engendered in lust, brought forth in hypocrisy and perfidy, and cherished and fed by plunder, devastation, and by rivers of innocent and Irish blood.

Benjamin Franklin was one of the principal architects of this new idea in the eighteenth century, when everyone was being encouraged to join in the capitalist programme: he wrote ‘time is money’ and ‘credit is money’. There was a new competitive ethic. ‘Love Thy Neighbour’ was replaced with ‘beat the other guy’.

Now the antidote to usury is love. Love not in the Hollywood sense, but selfless love, ‘limitless, undying love’ as the twentieth-century mystic John Lennon described it in ‘Across The Universe’. Love in this sense is closer to the real meaning of the word ‘charity’, *caritas*, or caring, and often they are used synonymously in the Bible.

Aldous Huxley, writing in his great work on mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy*, in 1946, says:

. . . the distinguishing marks of charity are disinterestedness, tranquility, and humility.

We find these sorts of ideas stated in the Sermon on the Mount:

You . . . have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies . . . you must therefore set no bounds to your love.

What is love? Now, unlike usury, which is a calculated move, love asks for nothing in return. It is not an investment. It is done for its own sake. (However, the reality is that if you have helped your neighbour, then your neighbour is more likely to help you in your hour of need. So it makes practical as well as spiritual sense to be neighbourly.)

How do you behave in a neighbourly fashion? Simple: eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. This is the cheerful nihilism put forward in another book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes:

Sheer futility, Qooleth says, sheer futility! What profit can we show for all our toil, toiling under the sun? ...

true happiness lies in eating and drinking and enjoying whatever has been achieved under the sun.

One simple expedient is alcohol. Organize parties. Every few months, I organize some sort of event or party in the village hall. In the summer, we rented the hall for an evening and I bought a barrel of beer, which is seventy-two pints, for about seventy quid. We put lilies on the tables to consider, and Victoria cooked two giant pieces of pork. We had a singsong led by me on the ukulele.

Last year we killed our two pigs at home. Suddenly we had a houseful of meat, so we distributed a few cuts among the neighbours.

Our former neighbour used to come and teach piano to our kids and I gave her tobacco in return. In relations between neighbours, we can relearn how to interact with each other without the intrusion of money. We can escape the commodity system.

Well, brothers and sisters. It appears that the usurers are being asked to repent once again, as they were in the Middle Ages. We everyday folk are taking great delight in the fall of the bankers. The nature of money is changing. It may be that we can create a system where money cannot beget money in the same way.

So I say to you: love thy neighbour. And when you ask, how shall I love my neighbour? I say, love thy neighbour! ◇

